君が電話をかけていた場所
三秋縋
メディアワークス文庫

Chapter 1: Cross My Heart and Hope to Die

Summer comes but once a year.

In a normal life, we experience only as many summers as we do years of our life. So there's nobody who's going to have lived hundreds of summers. Given the average Japanese lifespan, we'll experience somewhere around eighty summers before we die.

I'm not really sure if eighty is too many or too few. Life can feel much too long when nothing's going on, but all too short when things are happening - that's a quote from Atsushi Nakajima. Eighty summers will feel like way too many to people who can't enjoy summer, and way too few to those who can. Yeah, that's probably about right.

I hadn't even gotten to twenty summers yet. And not a single one among them was ever the same. They were their own summers with their own unique radiance. I couldn't say any one was better or worse than another. That's like trying to say certain shapes of cloud aren't as good as the others.

Laying out my current summers like marbles in a row, you'd notice that two of them had an unusual color. The summer of 1994, and the summer of 1988. The former was the hottest summer of my life, and the latter was the coldest. One had a deep blue color squashed between the blues of the sea and sky, and the other had an amber color like a pale sunset.

*

Now, I'm going to tell the story of the hottest summer of my life.

*

However, everything has an order. I'll probably need to explain the circumstances leading up to that summer, right?

Rewind a bit from the summer of 1994, to March 20th of that year. The day of South Minagisa Middle School's graduation ceremony.

That's where the story begins.

*

I washed my face with cold water and checked my injuries in the mirror. I had a bleeding cut about a centimeter long above my eye. Nothing else really stood out. There was a big bruise on the right side of my face, but unlike the cut, it hadn't just gotten there. It was always there; I was born with it.

I'd last looked in a mirror over a month ago, and it felt like the birthmark had gotten even darker since. Of course, I'm just saying that's how it felt. Since I usually try to avoid looking at myself in the mirror, the presence of the birthmark always strikes me when I do happen to see my face again. But in actuality, probably nothing had changed.

I kept looking into the mirror for a while. The birthmark was a chilling dark blue; it had the look of the skin there being dead. Or like it was smeared with soot, or growing mold, or, if you looked close enough, like a fish's scales.

Even I thought, "What a creepy birthmark."

I wiped my face dry with the sleeve of my uniform, grabbed my diploma from the shelf, and left the restroom. After leaving such a strong smell of ammonia, the air outside felt faintly sweet. There were quite a few students like me in the station plaza, holding the boxes containing their diplomas under their arms, sitting on benches and talking about things.

When I opened the door to go inside, I was greeted by a stove-like warmth. I was intending to wait there until the train arrived, but the area, cramped enough to begin with, was brimming with students having fun late into the night after the ceremony - terribly noisy and uncomfortable. Weighing warmth against silence, I ultimately decided to hurry out onto the platform.

In the middle of March, the nights are still cold. I went to button up my jacket, but found the second button missing. I had no memory of giving it to a girl as a memento or anything. Probably it had just been torn off in the scuffle.

I'd forgotten the reason for the fight. Trying to remember just wore me out.

After the ceremony, I was celebrating with my friends. But they were a hot-blooded bunch already, so bringing alcohol into the equation was bad news. It should have only been trivial conversation, but somehow it escalated to an argument, then becoming a four-on-three brawl. The group of four were getting jobs, and the three were high-school-bound. It was that sort of thing.

Fights weren't an unusual occurrence for me. No, I wouldn't say that - thinking about it, every time the seasons changed, it felt like we put on some big scuffle, like cats in mating season. Maybe that was how we dealt with the isolated feeling of our rural town, our vague unease for the future, and so on.

This would probably be the last of those “fights for honor.” After the scuffle ended, that’s what I found myself thinking, and it put me in a solemn mood. The fights ended without any conclusion worth calling a conclusion, like it just came to a draw. As we left, the employed four booed away the high school three. One who had been particularly hurt was yelling about how they would get payback. A fitting end for us, really. That brought a close to my junior high life.

When the train finally arrived and I sat down in my seat, I noticed two women in their early twenties standing by a door a little ways away, pointing toward me. The taller skinny one was wearing glasses without any lenses, and the shorter plumper one was wearing a face mask.

The two of them whispered in a way unique to talking about guilty subjects. It must have been about my birthmark, of course. As always. That’s how much it stood out.

I kicked the seat with my heel and shot them a glance of “You got a problem?”, and they awkwardly looked away. The others nearby looked at me as if to say something, but no one spoke up about any problem.

I closed my eyes and thought. Sheesh. I’m going to be in high school next month - how long am I going to keep up this idiotic behavior? It’s a waste of time, energy, and trust to respond belligerently to something that simply irks me. I need to learn the ways of patience and letting things slide.

My mad studying had paid off, as a few days ago, I received my acceptance to Minagisa First High. It was a prominent college-prep school in the prefecture, and I intended to start everything over there. Very few could go from my middle school of South Minagisa to Minagisa First High. In other words, hardly anyone who knew me in middle school would be there. An ideal opportunity to reinvent myself from scratch.

In my three years of junior high, my quick-tempered personality wound me up in a lot of fights. And whether I won or lost them, it always turned out to be a bad idea in some way. I’d had enough of it. Starting in high school, I wanted to stay indifferent to minor disputes, living a quiet, reserved life.

My aspiration for Minagisa First High actually began with the thought that more advanced schools have less petty conflict. You can’t always relate education to people’s qualities, but those who have lost a lot tend to dislike trouble.

The rumors claimed Minagisa High was more of a prep school than a typical high school, so your studies were chasing you asleep or awake, you had no time to spend on clubs or fun, and you wouldn’t have a decent youth. But I didn’t care about that at all. From the outset, I didn’t

think I could ever attain even an average adolescence. The idea of forming good relationships with my classmates and finding a wonderful girlfriend was far from my mind.

Because as long as I had this awful birthmark, people would never truly accept me.

I let out a little sigh.

You know, I thought, those girls who pointed at me are lucky. People who aren't confident in their lower face have face masks. People who aren't confident in their upper face have glasses. But people who aren't confident in the right side of their face have nothing. Unfair, huh.

The train stopped with an ear-grating sound. I got off onto the platform and smelled the faint spring air.

A gray-haired attendee in his forties stood at the ticket check, rudely staring at me as he took tickets. He seemed to be a relatively new hire, and was always like this when I passed by. I stopped, thinking that today I'd give him a piece of my mind, but realizing there were people behind me, I changed my mind and left the station.

I wandered around the shopping district outside the station. There wasn't a single person around, and my footsteps alone echoed. Most of the shops were shuttered, and not just because it was night. A shopping center built on the edge of town two years ago had sucked away the customers, turning a once-central street into a long line of shutters. Sports supply shop, cafe, electronics shop, butcher's shop, photo place, dry goods store, bank, beauty parlor… I gazed at the faded signs of each shop as I walked, imagining what was on the other side of the shutters. In the center of the district was a worn-out statue of a mermaid, looking wistfully toward her home.

Then it happened, right as I passed the tobacco shop in-between the accessory and candy shops.

A public telephone at the storefront began to ring. As if having awaited me for decades, it rang out with fateful timing.

I stopped and looked at the phone's LED screen, emitting a faint light in the darkness. The cabinet that contained it was old; there was no door, and no lighting.

Though it was rare, I knew that public phones could get calls. I recall in elementary school, a friend called 110 from a public phone as a prank, and was startled when he immediately got a call back. It made me curious, and I found out that public telephones do in fact have their own numbers.

The telephone bell wouldn’t stop. It kept ringing with a strong, stubborn will, yelling “I know you’re there, you know!”

The clock on the barbershop sign read 9:38.

Normally, I probably would have ignored it and went on by. But there was something in the echo of the phone that made me think, “This call is for me and no one else.” I looked around, and sure enough, I was the only person there.

Timidly, I answered the phone.

“I have a proposal,” the person on the other end said without any preface.

It was a woman’s voice. Probably somewhere from twenty to thirty. She spoke calmly, seeming to put care in every syllable. It wasn’t an automated voice; I could tell there was a real person on the line from her breathing. I heard roaring wind behind her, perhaps implying she was calling from outside.

Maybe the woman had found out the phone’s number by some happenstance and was having fun spooking passersby, I thought. It was plausible she was watching those who answered from somewhere, enjoying their reactions to her outrageous statements.

I didn’t answer, waiting for her move. Then she spoke as if whispering a secret.

“You still carry a love you can’t give up on. Am I wrong?”

Give me a break, I sighed. You want me to go along with this? I put back the receiver a little roughly and went back to walking. The phone rang again behind me, but I didn’t even look.

*

Three boys in high school squatting in the middle of the road, drinking from beer cans. Not an uncommon sight in the town of Minagisa. It sounds nice when you call it a quiet rural seaside town, but being all pubs and snacks without a single place for amusement, the youths are all bored to death. Those starved for excitement would quickly reach out for beer and cigarettes. For better or worse, this town had many ways for those who were underage to obtain those luxuries.

Finding another route would have been annoying, so I tried to pass beside them. One of them standing up at just that moment hit their back against my leg. The boy overreacted and grabbed my shoulder. I didn’t mean to cause any trouble, having already been in one big fight today. But when he started ridiculing my birthmark, I found myself fighting.

Unluckily, the one I punched seemed to be experienced in hand-to-hand combat, and the next moment I was lying on the ground. They looked down on me and shouted filthy insults, but my head felt so hazy, I only heard them vaguely, like if I were underwater.

By the time I felt ready to try and get back up, the three had vanished, leaving only empty beer cans. I put my hands on my knees and tried to stand, but my temple ached like it had a screwdriver wedged in it, and I let out a moan.

Lying down face-up, I looked at the stars for a while. Well, I couldn't see the stars, but occasionally I saw the moon through gaps in the clouds. I checked my back pocket and found my wallet missing as expected, but the cigarettes in my inner pocket were safe. I took a bent cigarette out of the crumpled box and lit it with a lighter.

Suddenly, I thought of Yui Hajikano.

For three years, from fourth grade to sixth grade, I was in the same class as her. Back then, whenever I got in a fight and got wounded like this, Hajikano would worry as if it was her who'd been hurt. She was nearly 20 centimeters shorter than me, but she'd stand on her tiptoes to stroke my head and admonish me. "Don't get in any more fights!"

Then she'd stick out her pinky and insist I pinky-promise - that was Hajikano's method. When I reluctantly offered my pinky, she'd give a satisfied smile. I never once kept the promise, and would get hurt again mere days later, but she still patiently tried to persuade me.

Looking back, it felt like Hajikano was the only one around then who took me seriously.

She was a pretty girl. Both Hajikano and I got people's attention, but for completely opposite reasons. I for my ugliness, and her for her beauty.

In a remote elementary school with many generally-unsatisfying kids, Yui Hajikano's seemingly-perfect appearance and talents were cruel, in a way. Many girls avoided standing next to Hajikano when taking photos, and many boys had unrequited love for her, their hearts breaking in an entirely self-contained way.

Hajikano simply being there made people give up on things. Children in the same class as her were taught directly how the world has absolute disparities that can't be overturned, no matter how much you struggle. Irrational things most people gradually realize when they get to middle school and throw themselves into study, clubs, and romance, we all learned instantly by her mere presence. It was too cruel a truth to learn as early as elementary school - though I learned it even sooner thanks to my birthmark.

People were mystified by how someone so overwhelming as Hajikano was personable with a

boy like me. In anyone's opinion, Hajikano and I were polar opposites. But if you asked me or Hajikano, we were the same in how we weren't treated like normal humans, albeit for opposite reasons. That alienation was the thread that linked us.

I don't have any idea what we talked about when we were together. I feel like it was all nothing important. Or, well, maybe the majority of the time wasn't spent talking, but just sitting around together. The silence I spent with Hajikano was comforting, oddly enough - rather than awkward, it felt like we were quietly confirming our friendship. As she stared silently into the distance, I watched her from beside.

There was just one conversation I could remember clearly.

"I think your birthmark's wonderful, Fukamachi."

It was Hajikano's response to something self-deriding I'd said about my birthmark. Yes, it just slipped out - something like "I'm impressed you'd stay with the likes of me," I think.

"Wonderful?", I asked. "That must be sarcastic. Just take a look at it. It's creepy enough to startle somebody."

Hajikano brought her face close and observed my birthmark at point-blank range. With a stupidly serious face, she looked for a few dozen seconds.

Then suddenly, she gently put her lips on it. There wasn't even a moment's hesitation.

"Startled?" She smiled mischievously.

Exactly right. Startled enough to die.

I had no clue how to respond to that. Hajikano even changed the subject as if nothing had happened, giving me no chance to figure out the intent of her actions. Maybe there was no real meaning. In any event, this incident didn't change our relationship at all. We just went on being good friends.

I don't think she particularly liked me for who I was. Hajikano simply had more good will than she knew what to do with at the time. Giving it out to people too readily would make those people get far too ecstatic and grandiosely thank her, so she needed to be careful picking people who wouldn't make that much of a ruckus.

Hajikano didn't know how much her every action made my heart tremble.

When we graduated from elementary school, I went to a public school in the Minagisa area, like most of my classmates. South Minagisa Middle School. The sort of school with

motorcycles in the halls, teachers being pushed off verandas, spraypainted graffiti all over the gym. If you had any common sense, it would drive you nuts in two weeks. I didn't have any common sense, so I was fine.

Hajikano went to a distant private girls' school. Mitsuba Middle School - a very high-class school. I don't know what kind of life she had there. I didn't hear any gossip, and didn't really care to know. She and I were in different worlds.

I'd never seen Hajikano since then.

I see, I nodded to myself. Let's say there is a love I can't give up on, like the woman on the public phone said.

Then it would surely be Hajikano she meant.

*

Finishing my cigarette, I quit my sentimental reminiscing and stood up. My body ached all over. There was a slight pain in my throat. Maybe I'd caught a cold.

What a terrible day, I thought.

But this unlucky day of mine wasn't over yet.

On my way back home, as I walked by a youth hotel being torn down - and naturally, this was at night, so there weren't any workers around - an accident happened.

There was a temporary enclosure around the building made of flat panels, about two meters high. From within it came an ominous clattering sound. I found it suspicious, but kept walking. Suddenly, there was the loud sound of something collapsing inside, and immediately after, one of the panels forcefully fell down on me.

Bad days are bad to the end.

Why I wasn't completely crushed, who called 119 for me, what happened before the ambulance arrived… I had absolutely no memory of it. When I woke up, I was in a hospital room with my legs in casts. After a few moments, I felt a full-body pain that made me want to yell. My vision went dark, and I broke out in a cold sweat.

Outside, the morning birds were chirping pleasantly.

And just like that, before entering high school, I suffered a major injury that took fourteen weeks to completely recover from. There had been compound fractures in both my legs. Right

after waking up, I was taken to an operating table, my legs bolted down. I was shown X-rays afterward; they were impressive fractures, good enough to show in textbooks. It wasn't life-altering, with no apparent worries of after-effects, but this made for a late start to high school.

Oh well, I thought. It wasn't unusual for me to be hospitalized for injuries. I'd be able to attend school in June at the earliest, and by then my class would have nearly finalized their friendships. But I hadn't really felt like making proper friends in high school anyway, so it wasn't a big issue. Besides, if you think about it, maybe it's easier to focus on studies in a hospital room than a classroom.

And as a matter of fact, I was terrifyingly diligent in my studies for those three months. Listening to my favorite music on my Walkman, I repeatedly read textbooks, getting good rest when I got tired of that - I kept up a simple and honest life. The room was white like a minimalist art show, and there was nothing worth looking at outside the window, so math and English were more stimulating than the alternatives.

As someone who liked going at his own pace, I was able to view this as an ideal situation. It felt more effective than trying to deal with drowsiness while desperately copying down words and formulas from the blackboard.

At the end of May, a man in his late sixties named Hashiba moved into my room with a broken left arm. He seemed fond of me quietly tackling my studies, and whenever we saw each other, he told me "Ask me if there's anything you're not sure about" with a face-crumpling smile. There was a lot that was unclear to me about English grammar, so I did ask him a few times, and he offered very understandable explanations which couldn't even be compared to your common lecturer. I asked him about it, and he said he used to be a teacher. He had a decent pile of thick Western books by his bed.

One rainy afternoon, Hashiba casually asked me a question.

"What's that birthmark mean to you?"

It was the first time I'd been asked a question like that, so I needed some time to think of an answer.

"It's the root of all evil," I replied. "If I just didn't have this birthmark, I think about eighty percent of the problems I have now would be solved. It makes others have a bias against me and find me disgusting, but the more pressing problem is that because of it, I can't like myself. People can't try their best for someone they don't even like. Not being able to like yourself means you can't even try for yourself."

"Hmm," Hashiba affirmed.

“On the other hand, by putting all the blame on this birthmark, it feels like I can avoid looking at what I don’t want to look at. Maybe I’m fooling myself, putting blame on this birthmark for problems which really, I could solve with enough effort. …But either way, there’s no doubt that it has a negative effect on me.”

Hashiba slowly nodded. “I see. Anything else?”

“That’s all. There’s nothing good about it. I don’t think an inferiority complex can help people grow. It’s generally just the starting point to a warped nature. Some can spring off of an inferiority complex to achieve success, but even once they do, they keep being tormented by inferiority.”

“What you say sounds right,” Hashiba said. “But looking at you, I can’t help but think this: Some serious flaws are helped to grow by their prudent owners. Of course, that’s speaking of those who can’t look away from their flaws.”

“Are you sure you’re not mistaking prudence for inferiority?”

“No mistake.” Hashiba’s wrinkled face smiled.

When I left the hospital, he gave me a book: the original version of Charles Bukowski’s “Ham on Rye.” Afterward, I started to read five pages of it a day, an English dictionary in one hand.

Ultimately, I was ready to begin high school in early July. By then, the students would be done with final exams, free from that pressure to let their hearts dance with thoughts of the coming summer vacation.

The summers when you’re in high school. No small number of people call those the best days of your life. But the radiance of summer is something that builds up from spring. Being thrown into the height of it from a world of antiseptic smells and white walls, I felt as out of place as if I’d walked into a total stranger’s birthday party.

Could I keep up in this world?

The Sunday night after I got out of the hospital, I visited the coast. I’d gotten into bed at 10 PM, but felt unusually awake, so I grabbed my cane and left out the back door. I was as nervous as anybody about school starting tomorrow.

I stopped by a store on the way and bought cigarettes from a vending machine. At the beach, I sat on the seawall and looked over the ocean faintly lit by the crescent moon for about an hour. I hadn’t been to the beach in a long time, but I made no major discoveries. The smell of

the tide felt a little stronger than usual, maybe.

On my way back home, walking through the silent residential district, I heard a phone ringing in the distance.

At first, I thought it was coming from someone's house. But as I walked, it grew louder.

I came to a stop at a phone booth by the bus stop. That's where it was coming from.

Something like this had happened before. I didn't dwell on it then, as it just seemed like a prank.

But ever since I received that call, with day after day that passed, that woman's words weighed increasingly on my mind.

You still carry a love you can't give up on.

Was that really just a prank call?

If it wasn't, what was she trying to say?

…Thinking about it, I felt like I'd been waiting for her to call me again ever since then.

I took the receiver and heard a familiar female voice.

"It seems you understand that I'm not playing a prank."

I replied, three months late. "I admit defeat. There is someone I can't give up on."

"Yes, that's right," the woman said with satisfaction. "Miss Yui Hajikano. You still refuse to let go of her."

I wasn't especially surprised to hear her say Hajikano's name. She was able to determine my location and make a nearby public phone ring. It didn't seem that strange she'd know about my crush.

"So, what was that proposal you were talking about?"

"Ah…" The woman sounded impressed. "How well you remember from three months ago."

"Just happened to stick with me."

"Well, let's put that aside. So, about the proposal I wanted to make before… Would you make

a bet with me?”

“A bet?”, I asked.

“Mr. Fukamachi.” The woman invoked my name very casually. “One summer, when you were 12, you fell in love with Hajikano. So accustomed to the biases held against you, the fact that Hajikano would pay your birthmark no mind and treat you as an equal made her like a goddess. Surely you thought of wanting her as a girlfriend more than just once or twice.”

The woman paused momentarily.

“…But she was too distant a goal for you. "I have no right to love her,” you thought, and so you suppressed your feelings for her.“

I wouldn’t deny it. "And?”, I pressed.

“You thought you had no right to love her… But at the same time, you thought this: "If only I didn’t have this birthmark, maybe our relationship could have been something a little different.”“

"Yeah, I did,” I admitted. Sure enough, she could see right through me, even regarding my birthmark. “But everyone’s like that. If only I were a little taller, if only my eyes were a little bigger, if only my teeth were a little nicer… It’s more unusual not to have those thoughts.”

“Well then, let’s try removing that birthmark,” the woman interrupted. “If you’re able to win Hajikano’s heart, you win the bet. It will be gone from your face forever. On the other hand, if you can’t cause any change in Hajikano’s feelings, I win the bet.”

I pushed my forehead and closed my eyes.

What was this woman saying?

“This birthmark won’t go away,” I mumbled with irritation. “I’ve tried all kinds of treatments. But none of them did a thing. It’s a special birthmark. So this bet can’t happen. Besides, I haven’t met Hajikano for three years, ever since we graduated elementary and went our separate ways. I don’t even know what her life is like now.”

“Then if your birthmark vanished and you suddenly reunited with Hajikano, you would go through with the bet?”

“Yeah, sure. If a miracle like that happened.”

The woman snorted softly. “Well, as for the limit… Let’s see. I’ll give you fifty days. In a few

hours it will be July 13th, so the bet will begin then, and you'll have until August 31st. Please, win over Hajikano by then."

The call suddenly ended. I stood motionless in front of the phone for a while.

Imagining a possibility, I checked with the side mirror of a car stopped under a streetlight, but the birthmark was still on my face as ever. Not a sign of being any lighter, not a sign of being any smaller.

So it was just a prank after all. Someone with thorough knowledge of me was playing with my emotions with bizarre devotion and elaborate means. It was hard to swallow right away, but I could come up with no other explanations. There were plenty of people who'd be bitter toward me, and in a town so lacking in excitement that "bored" just didn't cut it, young people would go far off the beaten track just for momentary thrills. Everybody just had nothing to do. I wouldn't find it odd if someone found out the numbers for all the public phones in town just to ridicule me.

I sighed and put my hands on my knees. I felt beat all of a sudden, probably due to my hospitalization reducing my stamina.

One thing was for sure: I was surprised by my own dejection. I began to feel self-loathing for having actually gone and checked a mirror.

Could I still not give it up?

I went home, took a hot shower, and crawled into bed. The bedside clock read 3 AM. Now I'd be stuck nodding off on my first day of school.

I closed my eyes and waited to lose consciousness as soon as possible. Only at times like these does a second hand sound like a loud metronome, my breathing accelerating to match it. I reached out to change the angle, but it had no effect. Even with the window open, the room was bizarrely humid, and my throat was dry.

When I finally got to sleep, the sky was turning white, and the early morning birds and cicadas were buzzing.

Mere minutes of sleep. But through that short lapse of consciousness, a major change to my life took place.

Miracles always happen when no one's looking.

Chapter 2: Fleeting Summer

Mirrors don't always tell the truth. When people look at their faces in the mirror, the light rays reflect off the mirror, refract once in the cornea, pass through the pupil, then refract again in the crystalline lens to project onto the retina, get converted into nerve signals, and finally travel to the optic center in the brain. Yet just before going into consciousness, it can be warped by the filter of self-love.

Strictly speaking, there exists no person who's ever seen themselves objectively. People's eyes see only what they want to see, and with that as a base, reconstruct the rest as they'd like it to be. When going up to a mirror, you subconsciously keep an angle and expression that makes you look more beautiful, and devote your attention to the parts of your face you're most confident in. The majority of people who say "I don't look good in photos" just can't accept the reality of how they actually are due to the self-image they've established by conspiring with mirrors to get their best side. That's what I think, at least.

Most people aren't aware of this filter until they get old enough to discern it. Unlucky people - or, in a sense, incredibly lucky people - go their whole lives not knowing it. In their youth, everyone's princesses and princes. No one so much as dreams that they're not actually Cinderella, but rather one of the stepsisters. Yet as people age, and begin to feel a separation between their self-awareness and the evaluation of others, they're left with no choice but to amend their self-image. I'm not a princess. I'm not a prince.

I realized that early in the summer in fourth grade. We were having a discussion to decide parts for a play at the school arts festival in September. Until that point, I'd only thought of my birthmark as a large mole at best. Even if my classmates teased me for it, I thought it was no different from kids with glasses or chubby kids being teased - nothing I considered too peculiar. Even when I was called associated names, I didn't feel that bad. In fact, I enjoyed it as if it was proof I was easy to get on with.

One boy's statement showed me otherwise.

"How about Phantom of the Opera?"

He raised his hand, then pointed at me.

"See, Yosuke'd be perfect for the Phantom!"

During a music class a few days ago, we'd watched a video of the musical The Phantom of

the Opera for just thirty minutes. The Phantom wore a mask covering the right side to hide his hideous face, so the boy had probably made a mental connection to me upon seeing it.

It was surely just meant to be an off-hand joke. A few people did chuckle secretly, and even I thought to myself, “Yeah, I get it.”

However, when our ever-gentle homeroom teacher in her late thirties heard his joke, she exploded with rage. She slammed her desk, angrily shouted “Don’t you know there are things you can’t say?!”, grabbed the joke-teller by the collar, and had him stand up front for a major lecturing. It went on until the chime for lunch came along. His eyes were utterly red from crying, and the air in the classroom had become oppressive. It felt like what should have been fun preparations for the festival had been ruined because of me.

In that classroom where no one spoke and only cutlery clattered, I realized the truth. Oh. So this birthmark of mine isn’t the kind of thing you can just laugh about and be done with. It’s a handicap so severe that adults will feel pity for me. Compared to “defects” like glasses or chubbiness or freckles, which could earn you affection, this was a whole other dimension of defective - it made me someone downright pitiful.

From that day forth, I become unusually anxious about the gazes of others. Once I was aware of it, I saw that more people than I’d thought focused their attention on my birthmark. Maybe I was overthinking it, or maybe our teacher’s passionate speech really did cause, in the majority of my classmates, a negative shift in perception of my birthmark. At any rate, I couldn’t help but hate the birthmark that covered my face.

I looked up how to remove birthmarks at the library, but my birthmark seemed to have a different cause from common hereditary marks like a Nevus of Ota or a Mongolian spot, so there seemed to be effectively no method of removing it. There had been cases of them going away naturally, it seemed, but even such miracles only seemed to happen on much lighter birthmarks than mine.

When I was young, my mom took me to various hospitals, but it always ended up being in vain. The topic didn’t come up among my family again for years afterward, but seeing me desperately looking into it all of a sudden that summer, my mom started trying hospitals again. I remember similar music box songs playing at every hospital we went to. The people in the waiting rooms all had skin conditions that were identifiable at a glance, and whenever they saw a patient who had it worse than them, they seemed to take some comfort in it.

Going to all these dermatologists, I came to learn that there were people cursed with far more severe skin problems than what I had. But that fact didn’t comfort me. In fact, it made me fed up to see how many irrational ailments existed in the world. My situation certainly wasn’t the worst. But that didn’t mean it would always be the case.

As my scopophobia worsened, my behavior got stranger, making me look that much more of an oddity, and making me more frightened still of others watching - this downward spiral continued until soon, I hardly talked to anyone even when I went to school. I was possessed by a persecution complex thinking that everyone was disgusted by me anyway, and couldn't believe in even the most friendly of smiles.

One night, I woke up from a sudden chill of unknown cause. I didn't seem to have caught a cold, and the temperature was over 70 degrees, yet I was struck with unbearable shakes. I hurried for the closet to get a down quilt, put it over the blanket, and dove back under.

Even by morning, the chills hadn't left me. I took the day off elementary school from them, and reluctantly wore a winter coat to school the next day. My mom suspected autonomic ataxia and took me to several hospitals, but came up with no ideas for treating it beyond not going to school for a while. Luckily, there were no symptoms other than chills, so if I just dressed warm, it wouldn't impact my life.

And so I began a slightly early summer vacation.

It was a freezing summer. While cicadas buzzed all around, I was curled up under thick blankets drinking warm tea. At night, I'd fill up a hot-water bottle and shiver to sleep holding it. When my parents went out for work, I snuck outside to get some fresh air; I wonder what the neighbors thought of me bundled up in double-layers under the blazing sun.

Once mom understood that the stress causing my autonomic ataxia was brought about by my birthmark, she stopped asked me all about my days at school.

"Well, just get some good rest" was all she said. "Don't worry about getting better quick. In fact, it might be nice to think of how you can better deal with those chills."

Had this condition lasted until winter, what would have happened to me? Even summer days over 90 felt like arctic winter. If the temperature went below freezing, maybe I'd have frozen to death. Or maybe I'd have gotten a fever and run around naked in the snow.

But I never got the chance to find out. About twenty days after taking my early vacation, my chills vanished like they were never there.

I'll just say that it was all thanks to Yui Hajikano.

*

My first day of high school started with pleasant weather.

Putting my arms through the sleeves of white summer clothes and slipping on new loafers, I opened the door and was embraced by the heat soaked into the asphalt. It seemed an old man in the area had been watering outside the front door, so the wet black road sparkled. The power poles and trees cast down distinct shadows, and the tall fuki growing in an empty lot let out a grassy smell.

I felt slightly dizzy from all the sensations to take in. I would be turning 16 this year, yet the beginning of summer was the one thing which still felt fresh. I felt I wouldn't get accustomed to it this time, either.

The season of summer brings about an excessive amount of life. The sun radiates ten times the energy, rainclouds freely scatter the essence of life onto the earth, plants grow monstrously, insects chirp like mad, and humans dance elated in the heat. And yet, that excessive life can be connected with excessive death. The reason ghost stories have become intrinsically linked with summer isn't likely to be the simple fact that they help to forget about the heat. Maybe we all implicitly understand that the bigger a fire burns, the sooner it will burn out. That excessive life comes about via a loaning of energy, and the tab will have to be paid back later.

At any rate, we tuck away this excessive life and death in our memories until the next summer comes, and unbeknownst to us, it shrinks and shrinks. So it can surprise us every time - to realize again that summer was such an intense season.

Due to some misestimation, I thought I left home with plenty of time to spare, yet only reached the station just before the train pulled in. All the passengers had already spilled out onto the platform, and I heard the brakes screech.

As I showed my pass to the worker and passed through the ticket check, I heard a voice from behind cheerfully tell me "Have a good ride!" I turned around and realized it had been that attendee who always stared blatantly at my birthmark.

Though I found that odd, I boarded the train. It was filled with the mixed smells of sweat and tobacco, ensuring my day started with a feeling of disgust.

While looking around for a seat, I noticed two girls over by the wall, wearing uniforms for a different high school, and one of them pointing at me. Laughing about my birthmark, I groaned, and gave them a glare - then as if wondering if she'd done something wrong, she awkwardly averted her eyes, and a shy smile came to her lips.

Getting a reaction like that was extremely rare, so I was thrown off. There was the attendant's greeting, too; maybe the world had gotten a little nicer while I was hospitalized? I shook my head; no, that couldn't be right. Maybe everyone is just elated about summer's arrival.

I disembarked three stops later, mixed in with people all wearing the same uniform, and walked the thirty-or-so minute path to the school. There was apparently an elementary school nearby, and a huge number of grade-schoolers passed us by. About one-third of them looked at my face and greeted me nicely. I faltered, but greeted them back.

Heading straight ahead from the station for a while, in a packed residential district past a railroad crossing, was the school I now attended: Minagisa First High. The building itself was easy to find, but the front gate was so small as to be mistaken for the back entrance - first-time visitors would have to walk along the rusty fence around the area several times in search of it.

On the generally drab-looking building hung three curtains, on which were written the lackluster achievements of lackluster clubs. The eaves untouched by rain were dirty beyond cleaning, and really brought to mind seediness when viewed from below. I'd only visited it twice, but no doubt, this was a high school that was leagues away from elegance.

While walking around the midpoint between the station and school, I saw a strange movement out of the corner of my eye. I stopped and turned around, and met eyes with myself in a reflector on the road. So it was me in the reflection who I'd seen move.

I was about to start walking again, but something stopped me.

A powerful, unsettling feeling.

I came to a halt and looked all around my body. I checked my clothes. My uniform was on properly. My shirt wasn't one button misaligned or anything. My pants weren't inside-out, and my belt was tight.

But still, I turned around again, and peered at the mirror.

Yes, something was strange. I searched to find what it could be.

Needless to say, it was seeing myself in the mirror that had triggered that feeling.

Not caring about getting my hands dirty, I scrubbed off the dusty mirror, then looked at my reflection in it once more.

And then I understood.

The person in the mirror looked similar to me. But he wasn't me. He was missing one decisive element that made up who I am.

He was an unfamiliar figure, yet somewhere in my mind, I felt nostalgic. Because it was my ideal appearance, my “if only it were like this,” which I’d imagined time after time.

The giant birthmark was gone without a trace, as if it had been washed off.

All sounds and sights instantly became distant. I stood awestruck in front of the mirror.

I felt deep confusion.

A man bumped into me from behind, and I nearly toppled over. I heard an apology, but that was neither here nor there for me. Watching me continue to stare at the mirror, he gave a dubious look and left.

I fearfully observed the area where the birthmark had been from all angles. I confirmed it was no trick of the light or illusion caused by a clouded mirror.

I wonder if there’s an infallible way to determine whether this is a dream or reality, I thought. Dreams where your wishes are realized are hardly rare. Most dreams are based on a mix of people’s dormant unease and desires. Dreams where you overcome your inferiority are probably the model example. I couldn’t get too excited yet - I had to confirm that what I was seeing was reality.

I tried closing my eyes for ten seconds. It may just be me, but closing my eyes or covering my ears in a dream to intercept the flow of information often broke the chain of association, causing the dream to end. Whenever I had a bad dream, and was aware of it being one, I would employ this method.

But ten seconds, twenty seconds, thirty seconds brought no change. My senses were still perfectly clear.

I opened my eyes and looked at the mirror. It showed, of course, me without the birthmark.

This isn’t a dream. For now, that’s what I have to think. So then, a new question.

What’s going on?

I desperately thought. The fact that I still failed to come up with any theories worth calling theories surely wasn’t only to be blamed on a lack of sleep. Somewhere in my heart, I knew that - essentially, unless a major change occurred in my thoughts, I knew that no amount of worrying would get me an answer. Unless I were to believe a certain absurd story, thinking

things through to the end would only send me in circles.

But I was still unable to accept it. Until I heard it from her own mouth, I couldn't present that conclusion.

I wanted to go somewhere with a public phone. But I didn't know how I would do that here, at a campus whose geography I didn't know my way around. That said, there was probably at least one inside the building. Maybe simply going to school would be the best option. In any event, I couldn't stand here in the middle of the road forever. There was already nobody around, and if I didn't get going soon, I would be unable to make it on time for my first class.

Reluctantly, I looked away from the reflector and set my sights on the school building, visible through the gaps between houses.

Despite it being my first day at school, school had become all but meaningless to me now. Even as I listened to the homeroom teacher in a faculty room filled with the smell of instant coffee, I was completely absentminded. Then, of all times, he gave all kinds of advice in a passionate tone, more than just the bare essentials. "Joining the class now will be tough, no doubt, but they're all nice, so take it seriously and you'll do fine"; "you'll want to reach a certain level of familiarity with everyone before summer break starts, so good luck"; etcetera.

The teacher was an honest man in his mid-thirties, his hair slicked and shining. His name was Kasai. About five minutes after he started talking, a teacher with a slumped posture arrived and whispered something into his ear. Looking as if his mood had been dampened, he told me to wait here for a while and left the faculty room.

Once Kasai was gone, I left the faculty room myself without asking and entered the faculty bathroom. To confirm again that my birthmark was still gone. I couldn't help feeling that the moment I looked away, it would be back to normal. Because with how simply it went away, perhaps it could just as simply return.

Of course, it was just a needless worry. It was, indeed, still gone. I leaned back on the wall as if collapsing and continued to look in the mirror.

It had been years since I looked so closely at my own face.

That's not a bad face, I thought, as if it weren't my own.

And then, I could no longer take a single step from where I stood. I suppose I felt a compulsion to give this sight if only a second more to be etched into my mind. If I looked away, would that birthmark be back? If I didn't keep looking and getting accustomed to "me without the birthmark," would my mind notice that my body didn't match my self-perception

and create it again? I couldn't get such worries out of my mind.

It was probably only a couple of minutes before Kasai opened the bathroom door and called my name, or maybe it was more then twenty. With his "Hey, Fukamachi," I finally came back to my senses. "I can understand being nervous on your first day, but don't vanish on me suddenly."

Never mind nervous, I didn't care one bit about the people I was about to meet - but I didn't want to explain myself. I apologized for suddenly absconding, and Kasai patted my shoulder. "Don't overthink it. It'll work out."

Standing in front of the class, I don't remember what I really said in my introduction. I think it was more or less stringing together words I felt like I'd heard somewhere just to get through it. My head was filled with thoughts of my vanished birthmark, so it just wasn't the time for that. Judging from what I saw of Kasai's grim face, it was probably a pretty blunt introduction. I feel like there was a stir among the students.

My first impression was the worst. That said, I'd never had any intention of getting friendly in this classroom, so I didn't mind one bit if it caused everyone to hate me.

The absence of my birthmark didn't appear to be a mere illusion. Generally, when people first met me, they'd stare at it curiously for a few seconds, or avert their eyes and try to not look me in the eye again. But none of the students here were giving me that reaction. They just seemed to think of me as an guy with poor social skills.

After my simplistic introduction and some obligatory applause, Kasai pointed to an empty seat in the far back and told me to sit there. The desks were arranged with seven people in the two columns by the windows, but the other five columns having six people each. So my seat was one of only two in the very back row.

While walking to my seat, I sensed different looks upon me than usual. Whether they were looks of curiosity toward a classmate who was appearing three months late, or demeaning looks toward a guy who couldn't even give a proper introduction, I couldn't be sure.

After being told a few messages, morning homeroom ended, and Kasai was replaced by the first period teacher, who began class without delay. The English teacher, a woman with short hair in her late twenties, seemed to pay no mind to the new face suddenly appearing in her class. I didn't listen much to the lecture, staring at a blank notebook and thinking about my birthmark.

I heard black cicadas from the trees surrounding the bike-parking area. The students all had uniformly serious faces as they listened to the teacher. If there was something they didn't get,

their faces turned restless, and they looked happy when they understood something they hadn't been able to before. A huge difference from the bunch I'd been with in middle school.

Class ended in the blink of an eye, and it became break time. I didn't get a crowd of students with burning curiosity surrounding me to ask questions. Some people gave me oblique glances since I was just sitting there absentmindedly, not talking to anyone, but that was all. Half the people in the room were grouped up and talking to each other, and the other half had notebooks and textbooks open. I wanted to go find a public phone, but ten minutes didn't seem like enough to find one in a school I'd never really explored before. I'd just have to wait until lunch.

Bothered by the sunlight, I looked over to an empty seat in front and to the right of mine. The desk's owner didn't seem to have come to class, and there was nothing inside it. On the back of the seat, the number "1836" had been written in permanent marker. What did that number mean? Surely it wasn't the seat number.

The chime for the end of the break period rang, and the scattered students hurried back to their desks. Not long after second period began, either due to my lack of sleep last night or the bizarre events of this morning, I was struck with drowsiness as heavy as a cloth soaked with water. Not wanting to be nodding off even on the first day, I pinched my brow and desperately fought it, but sadly, my eyelids fell in minutes.

I only slept for about twenty minutes, but had an oddly vivid dream. A dream in which my birthmark returned. Washing my face in the bathroom, I looked up and spotted it. "Ah, sure enough, that was just a dream." My shoulders slumped.

In the dream, I was dejected, yet somehow relieved. Maybe, as odious a defect as it was, I had carried it so long as to acquire some amount of affection for it. Or perhaps I was relieved to be free from the pressure of having no excuses anymore, now that my greatest handicap was rid of.

I woke up to being poked in the upper arm. It took me a bit to realize I was in neither the hospital room nor my room at home. This was a classroom, so it wasn't a caretaker or parent who woke me.

I looked to my right. The girl in the next seat had woken me up, and looked at me as if stunned by the imprudence of someone who would nod off so early in the morning on their first day attending. Wondering how long I'd slept, I sat up and looked at the wall clock. Second period was already about to end. Maybe she woke me up in time for greetings.

I bowed my head and told her thanks, but she had already turned her attention to the blackboard. It almost seemed like she was blatantly ignoring me. Maybe trying to tell me "I don't need your thanks." Perhaps she woke me up not so much out of good will, but because

the teacher yelling at me for sleeping would cause a scene in the classroom and she wanted to avoid that.

My eyes stayed on her. Black hair long enough to reach her chest hung over her well-shaped ears, and her neat facial structure and thin neck stood out. A plain face at a glance, but impressively well-featured if you looked closely. The sailor uniform of Minagisa First High felt like it was made for her. She looked almost comically serious glaring at the board, giving me the impression she was stubborn and not too adaptable. She was sitting with bizarrely good posture, as if this were a tea ceremony, and yet was still shorter sitting down than other girls nearby.

Simply put, a girl like her couldn't be further distanced from a hooligan like me. I doubted we could see eye-to-eye about anything, even how to hold chopsticks.

Class ended. Due to the dream I'd had, I was restless. As I stood up from my seat to go to the bathroom and check my birthmark again, the girl who had woken me up earlier mumbled an "um…" in my direction.

At first, I didn't notice I was being spoken to. If I were to list the people who would decide to speak to me themselves, there would be Hajikano, and then there would be a bunch of good-for-nothings similarly ostracized from society. I would have never dreamed that someone who seemed like she'd be well-trusted by her classmates and teachers would reach out to me.

"Are your injuries all right now?", the girl sitting next to me asked, as naturally as speaking to an old friend.

Processing the voice as only noise, I suddenly noticed a word with a strong connection to me, hurriedly replayed the sentence in my mind, and considering the possibility that it was directed at me, timidly looked toward the speaker.

We made eye contact.

"Could you be talking to me?", I asked.

"Yes," the girl nodded deeply. "Am I a bother?"

"No, nothing like that, just, um…" I sputtered vaguely. "It's unexpected that a girl like you would talk to me at our first meeting."

After taking a few seconds to think about what I meant, she had a slightly pained smile.

"Do I not look like I'm interested in other people?"

“No, I didn’t meant it like that.”
“Then how did you mean it?”
“It’s just, like… I thought you disliked me.”
With the same expression, the girl tilted her head. “Why? I won’t like or dislike someone I’ve never even spoken to.”
“Then you’ll come to hate me later.”

She went silent for some seconds to ponder the implication of my response. Then suddenly, her eyes narrowed and she giggled. Apparently interpreting it as a joke told with a serious face.

“How disparaging,” she said. “Or are you no good with people liking you?”
“I dunno. Haven’t had any experience with that.”
“Is that right?”

The girl smiled elegantly with little movement of her lips. This too was mistaken as a joke, it seemed.

“I’m not lying. I really don’t have any experience being liked.”
“Yes, yes, I understand,” she nodded, not believing at all.
Holding in my irritation, I sighed. “To ask you back, are you skilled at being liked?”
“I don’t know. I don’t have any experience in that area,” the girl in the neighboring seat said smugly.

No doubt it was a lie, of course. In fact, it sure wouldn’t surprise me if she had several people falling for her every time she took the train or bus.

I sat there stunned and gave no response. Then the girl reached into her bag, took out a long rectangular piece of paper, and put it on my desk.

“What’s this?”, I asked.

“A tanzaku,” she told me, waving about one for herself between her fingertips. “They had them out in the hall. I took another one as a spare, but I’ll give it to you.”

“Tanzaku, huh? Well, by the Gregorian calendar, Tanabata ended a week ago, and by the lunar calendar, isn’t it much too soon?”
“From Orihime and Hikoboshi’s perspective, a mere week or month is within the margin of error.”
“Is that how it works?”
“Yes, it is. As fellows in having no experience being liked, let’s wish to Orihime and Hikoboshi to have someone like us.”

After staring at the pale blue tanzaku for a while, I handed it back to the girl.

“I don’t need it. You can use mine for yourself.”

“Erm, I don’t think Orihime or Hikoboshi will grant my wish either,” she said, holding a pen and looking out into empty space. “But it’s a good chance to think about what you’re seeking. As happy as they may be, people who don’t know what they want will go on never getting it. Prayers exist to figure out what wish you want granted.”

“Look, it’s not like I hate prayers,” I replied. “To tell you the truth, I’ve only just had a wish granted. A dream I’d had for a long time came true just a couple of hours ago. I feel like I’ll be punished if I wish for any more.”

“My, congratulations,” the girl said, putting her pen down to quietly clap. “I’m very envious. …Was your wish to recover from your injury? Or perhaps to go to high school?”

“Neither. It’s a more personal wish.”
“I see. Then I probably shouldn’t probe too deeply.”
“I’d appreciate it.”

“Well then.” She pointed to the tanzaku by my hand. “Instead, please make a wish for me.”
“For what?”, I asked.
“Freedom,” she replied.

“Please, wish for my freedom.”

Now it was my turn to wonder about the implications of her words. Though her gentle smile suggested there was ample room to take it as a joke, there was a hint of sincerity somewhere in her voice.

“Alright” was all I said, picking up a pen.

And I asked. “By the way, what’s your name?”

“Chigusa. Chigusa Ogiue,” she answered, with her eyes still lowered on the tanzaku. “And you are Yosuke Fukamachi.”

“Yeah, I know.”

When the next break arrived, we had another trivial conversation. According to the things

Chigusa told me, it seemed unlikely I had missed any lessons beyond the scope of my independent studying, luckily.

Once on lunch break, I left the classroom right away. I ducked into the bathroom and checked a third time in the mirror that there had been no changes. Then I made my way through the floods of people in the hallways and stairwells, going down to the first floor to find a phone. I found what I was looking for next to a vending machine with a terrible selection placed outside an office.

That was where the problems began. I had no means of contacting that woman myself. I expected that if I were just within range to hear the ringing she would make a call for me, but now, the phone was deathly silent.

I sat at the drinking fountain across the hall and wiped sweat from my brow. Right by the window, a number of cicadas were buzzing as if in a competition. Students came one after another to the vending machine to buy whatever food they liked.

Perhaps because this place had people around, it wouldn't do. Thinking about it, that woman had only called me when I was totally alone, so far without exception. Probably it would have been inconvenient for anyone but me to hear the conversation.

After waiting about ten minutes, I felt a little hungry. I should probably give up on this for now and just get some lunch already, I thought. I felt I could wait here forever and the phone would never ring. The times when that woman called just had to have that unique sense of utter unease.

Up on the second floor, I bought some leftover shiso onigiri, then stopped by the bathroom to check for my birthmark. How many times was that, now? Considering how I would never intentionally look at myself in the mirror before, I'd probably done two years' worth today alone.

I left the bathroom and returned to the classroom on the fourth floor. Most of the students were eating and happily chatting with their friends, but I didn't see Chigusa around. Maybe she'd gone to see friends in another class.

I sat down, and the boy sitting in front of me twisted his upper body around and put an elbow on my desk. He had long dark hair, and a friendly-looking face. From his toned legs, I wondered if he played soccer.

"You had an awfully long spring break, didn't ya?", he said, leaning forward. We were less than 30 centimeters apart. "Hey, looks like Ogiue's taken a liking to you, Nice, nice. Man, am I envious!"

Though taken aback my his familiarity with me, I replied. “We only said a few words. That’s not necessarily a liking.”

The boy shook his head dramatically. “You only say that because you don’t know Chigusa Ogiue. …Didn’t you get this sorta strange feeling talking with her?”

Hearing that, I thought back on my brief conversations with Chigusa.

“She *is* a little strange, now that you mention it. Seems like she has a tendency to act too polite.”

“That’s it,” he said, raising his index finger with a disagreeable smirk. “She’s an all-out princess. I don’t know the details, but apparently her family’s pretty rich.”

That was easy to imagine. Compared to an ordinary high schooler, you could feel the difference in Chigusa’s conduct indicating a better upbringing. She must have breathed different air, ate different food, and been raised with a different philosophy from us.

“I don’t get it, though,” I wondered aloud. “Why would a rich girl attend a remote school like this?”

“We think it’s weird, too. Why do you think? Trying to get some human experiences here, maybe?”

“To experience such prejudices would be one reason.”

Though I don’t know when, Chigusa had returned to the classroom, and stood behind the boy.

“Oh, you heard,” the boy said with surprise, trying to hide his awkwardness.

“If you’re going to gossip about someone, do it somewhere they won’t hear you, please.”

The boy reached for the back of his head and combed his hair repeatedly, then leaned back in his chair defiantly.

“I should ask outright while I’ve got the chance. Why did you pick this school, Ogiue?”

“To get some human experiences,” Chigusa answered with a demure look.

“Somebody’s got a grudge,” he joked with a pained smile. “Free up some more room in your heart. Or else you’ll never open up to everybody.”

“I’m in the midst of opening up to him.” Chigusa pointed toward me. “And you are in the

way.”

“My bad, then,” the boy shrugged.

Someone from a group of four or five students in the corner of the classroom called toward him, “Nagahora, hurry up!” The boy responded to it, said “Well, keep Ogiue company,” slapped my shoulder, and went over to his friends.

He probably wasn’t that bad of a person. He didn’t seem to have any particular ill will toward Chigusa, either.

“Did he tell you anything else odd?”, Chigusa asked me.

“I wanna say he said "it’s an honor to be in the same classroom as the most beautiful girl in the school.”“

"Surely he wouldn’t have given such flattery,” she snorted. “I’ll say this just to avoid any misunderstandings: my family is certainly not rich. That rumor was only true a very long time ago. Because now, it’s a perfectly average family.”

While I pondered how large a gap there might have been between what she called an “average family” and what I thought that was, I bit into my onigiri and washed it down with tea. Chigusa took out a lunch box from her bag, and while it looked a little old, it also had a fancy-looking lacquer.

“Why not explain that to, uh… to Nagahora?”

“Why, indeed?” She bent her head. “Perhaps I still wish to have them continuing to misunderstand. Perhaps I find it comfortable having them think of me as being rich, and keeping their distance. …By the way, Fukamachi. Would you like to have lunch together?”

“I don’t mind, but… Um, is that not a bother?”

Chigusa’s face hardened with a look like she’d been lied to, then she covered her mouth and laughed like she found something deeply funny. “I suppose that’s what I should be asking you. Erm, Fukamachi, would it not bother you?”
“Surely not. In fact, I’m grateful.”
“To eat lunch with the most beautiful girl in the school?”
“Yeah.”
“Even knowing it’s a joke, it makes me happy.”

Chigusa approached my desk, placed a chair about 30 centimeters away, and sat down in it holding her skirt down with one hand. Her necktie with two white lines on it shook slightly.

I heard a “let’s eat” as quiet as a whisper.

After school, Chigusa showed me around the campus. I didn’t know if she did it of her own volition, or if that nosy teacher had requested her to. But she didn’t seem to dislike it, at least.

“If your legs start to hurt, don’t hesitate to say so,” Chigusa said.

“I think I’ll be fine.” I stepped in place to check their status, and nothing hurt or felt out of place.

Outside the open windows of the hallway, I heard shouts from the athletics club, the sound of metal bats hitting baseballs, a trombone practicing, and chaotic guitar-tuning from the light music club. Inter-high-school preliminaries and the culture festival were approaching, so everyone was busy enough to make the sweltering heat of the building seem only natural.

“By the way, Ogiue, don’t you have a club to be with?”

“Not to worry,” she responded, putting a hand to her chest and shaking her head. “My records will say "flower arrangement club,” but as for our activity… we generally just sit around and chat. …By the way, Fukamachi, have you already decided what club to join?“

"I think I probably won’t join any.”
“Indeed, you have just recovered from an injury.”
“No, my legs are fine. I just can’t even imagine myself doing well anywhere like that.”
“You’re overthinking.”
“Maybe so. But my bad feelings tend to be validated.”

Chigusa stopped and looked up at my face. She briefly opened her mouth, then closed it as if rethinking it, and after taking some time to choose her words, spoke.

“Actually, Fukamachi… To tell the truth, I’m also somewhat of a latecomer. I had a slight health issue that kept me from coming to school until early May. It’s quite recent that I could even walk on my own legs; until half a month ago, I was using a wheelchair. So I can understand your feeling of being at a loss. It feels as if the world has left you behind.”

Chigusa let out a breath, then smiled to encourage me.

“But I will guarantee it. You will be fine, Fukamachi. I’m sure everything will work out well for you. I have no proof, but that’s the feeling I get.”

“Thanks,” I told her. “That makes me feel better.”

We resumed walking. We passed by lots of people in our once-around of the school, but not one person gave me peeking glances like they had when my birthmark was still there. Maybe people's glances just didn't bother me if I felt good myself. But either way, it was clearly thanks to my birthmark being gone. It surprised me how much easier it became to live in this world with just a minor change to my appearance.

After going around the whole building, we changed shoes at the entrance and went outside. After going around to the back to show me the locations of the club rooms and the second gymnasium, Chigusa tapped my shoulder and pointed to someone on the field. I looked and found Nagahora waving at us, holding a squeeze bottle in his other hand. Just as I predicted, he seemed to be part of the soccer club. He wore white practice clothes stained with dirt.

"I believe he's waiting for your response," Chigusa whispered in my ear.

I waved back with some doubts in my mind, and Nagahora put up his thumb with a satisfied smile. Immediately after, there came an instruction from their supervisor, so he hurried to join the other members.

"He's not a bad person," Chigusa informed me. "If you shut your eyes to his gossipping."

"Seems like it," I nodded.

Once the tour was over, it was past 7 PM. The surroundings had gotten suddenly dim, evening bugs began to chirp, nighttime lights came on at the field, and the wind instruments club shifted to practicing as a group.

Walking a straight line to the school gate alongside Chigusa, I thanked her.

"You helped me a lot today. I'm grateful."

"No, no. I was most happy to take part in meddling with such a man of leisure," Chigusa said with an exaggerated bow of her head. "Besides, were I not there, I believe someone else would have gladly taken up my role."

"Wouldn't think so. The only people to talk to me today have just been you and Nagahora."

"But everyone looked as if they wished to talk to you."

"To *me*?" I was unable to hide the sheer bewilderment in my voice. "Do they have a problem with me?"

"You truly are pessimistic, Fukamachi," Chigusa smiled.

We walked in silence down a path along a river. Nearly half of the security lights along the sides of the road had gone out or were flickering, and mosquitoes and scarab beetles flew around the brightest spots. Frogs croaked endlessly from a nearby rice paddy, and I heard a dull sound of train brakes in the distance. The smell of grilled fish wafted from the ventilation of someone's house.

I thought deeply on how never for a second had I expected to be heading home from school with someone on my very first day.

When it came time to part ways, Chigusa took a deep breath. "Erm… Fukamachi."

"Whatever could it be?", I responded with silly politeness, and her eyes smiled a bit.

"Well… yes. If there's anything worrying you, don't hesitate to tell me. We will worry about it together."

"Ah, I see. Not necessarily saying you'll resolve it."

"Yes. Because in practice, the things someone can do for another are very few."

"Absolutely," I agreed.

*

Maybe, just maybe, I could live a proper life.

Walking casually down the streets outside of the station, I began to think so. Both Chigusa and Nagahora seemed to show affection toward me, and nobody among my classmates looked bad. The classes seemed like something I could keep up with, too. I couldn't be definite since it was just one day, but for now, there was nothing at all to be uneasy about.

No - if there were one matter for concern, it was, of course, the return of my birthmark.

Chigusa's words of "You will be fine, Fukamachi" made me genuinely happy. But she could only say that not knowing my true appearance. Not knowing my hideousness. And I didn't know how long I could keep this transient appearance. If the appointed day came with me still not having won Hajikano's heart, my face would go back to normal.

If my birthmark were to come back tomorrow, what would Chigusa say when she saw my face? Would she still be able to guarantee to me "You will be fine, Fukamachi"?

Or maybe it was as she said, and I was just too pessimistic, the absence or presence of my

birthmark not meaning much in the long run. Then it wasn't impossible that I didn't have as many problems as I thought, and had simply been in bad circumstances up to now…

Going around in circles as usual. Wondering about what others thought of me would never tell me anything. And yet I couldn't *not* think about it.

I awaited the sound of a phone. There were so many questions I had to ask that woman. How far would I have to take things with Hajikano to satisfy the "victory condition" of this bet? More importantly, would Hajikano show up in front of me? When? Would it be better for me to go look for her?

My feet stopped. I only meant to take a brief detour on the way home, but I had gotten lost. I was on a road with no lights, so narrow I didn't even pass by vending machines, and tall grass grew as tall as it liked by the guardrails on each side. Direction-wise, though, it seemed like I couldn't be too far off-course, so I kept walking, expecting to find a familiar street sooner or later.

After wandering for nearly forty minutes, I finally arrived at a place I knew. It appeared I had done a complete loop, and arrived back at the high school. It was long past closing time, so with the exception of the first floor faculty room, all the lights on campus were off, with only the green glow of exit signs illuminating in places.

This was when I realized there was a shrine next to the school. When I turned the corner intending to go around to the front of the building, a bright red torii stood out in my vision. On both sides of the gate were statues of Inari, and beyond it were long stone steps that went up toward another large torii at the top.

Given there might have been well over a hundred steps on those stairs, I shouldn't have had the vitality left to climb them. I didn't even have a particular inquisitiveness for shrines, and I didn't expect it would be a shortcut to the train station.

As yet, as if being guided, I went up the steps.

Traversing the stairs practically broke my bones. I had already walked for countless minutes, my shirt soaked with sweat. Tall cedars lined both sides, and their long roots pushed up the stone steps in places. After reaching the eightieth step, I stopped counting. I looked down, put my hands on my knees, emptied my head, and just kept walking. There were signs of my injured legs starting to ache, but I couldn't turn back after coming this far.

After surmounting the final step, I came to a flat area a little wider than a 25-meter pool. It seemed to be a shrine that incorporated a park; swings, slides, and benches were placed almost shamefully in the corners. Judging from the long wild grass under the benches, I doubted this place got many visitors.

Turning around, I could get a view of the area around Minagisa First High. I sat on the steps and let out a deep breath, gazing at the school, houses, and supermarkets below. The cold wind drying my sweaty body felt good.

Once I felt I'd had my fill of the modest sights, I stood up to go around once more before returning. Just then, there was a sound behind me. It was like rusted metal rubbing against something - a sound that made me feel genuine fear.

Telling myself the wind just made the play equipment creak, I swallowed down my saliva and looked around.

When I saw the source of the odd sound, I nearly yelped.

There was someone sitting on a moving swing.

It was too dark to see her face, but from her height and general appearance, she seemed to be a girl about my age. She wore a loose and worn-out white shirt and a short skirt, so one could think she'd just walked out of her own room. At a time like this, in a place like this, dressed like that, the girl sitting alone on a swing was a strange sight indeed.

And I didn't need to ask myself "what in the world is she doing?"

She was lying back on the swing, looking up. And up where she was looking, there was a rope.

The rope hanging from the pole was tied in a ring, like a rope you'd hang from for gymnastics. But the fact that there was only one was strange, and the opening seemed a little too big for it.

Yes, you could tell from a glance that it was the girl sitting on the swing who had tied that rope, and that she was about to put her head in it to hang from. The rope hung not directly above one of the swings, but from the center of the bar, and below it was a pile of old books you'd think had been brought from a local junkyard. Acting as a pedestal, the pile was a little bit behind the rope, so after putting her head in, she could simply step off and let gravity do the rest.

She was, at just this moment, about to carry it out. Slowly getting off the swing, she took off her sandals. Carefully standing on the pile of books, she reached for the rope and put it around her neck.

A strong wind blew, and the trees rustled.

It appeared she hadn't noticed yet that there was anyone but her in the park. I stepped gradually closer to the swings. Whether it was persuading her, or pulling her away, or anything, I wanted to get myself in a position where I could quickly respond if she did something hasty.

As I focused my senses trying to not make any noise, the crickets got much louder. Listening to their steady chirping, my sense of time and distance got fuzzy. If I wasn't carreful, I could fall over. Though feeling like I was about to have a dizzy spell, I moved forward bit by bit.

Right as I was nearly within a safe distance, she suddenly noticed the creeping shadow and looked directly at me.

Rather than "do something hasty," I believe her surprise led to an error in judgement.

My evidence was the fact that her body initially fell backward. If she had been trying to die before I could stop her, she should have fallen forward. Maybe my appearance startled her, and she was trying to get her neck out and step off the pedestal.

But due to her haste, the rope didn't quite come loose. In fact, due to her loss of balance, it became tight around her neck - and meanwhile, her feet left the footstool as planned. The pile of books collapsed, and her leg cut through the air.

The rope made a dull sound as it tightened.

For a moment, I couldn't act. Because before I thought "I have to save her," I was struck with terror and instead thought to run away from here as soon as possible. It was the first time I'd ever been in a situation like this, where someone's life was on the line. I somehow felt that if I reached my hand out to save her, something murky black surrounding her death would contaminate me too. So there was the slightest delay before my body's natural reflexes began to overtake my reasoning and move.

I ran over in a hurry and put my right hand behind her thigh to hold her up. With my left, I searched for her neck and grabbed the rope. But her weight had tightened it, and wouldn't easily loosen for me. The girl coughed violently.

As I blindly fiddled in the general vicinity of the knot, she thrashed about in my arm. It was so fierce, I had to wonder where her little body concealed that strength, and struggling to suppress her made untying the rope increasingly difficult. When I tightened my grip in irritation, she desperately struggled in return.

What felt like seconds away from my right arm giving out, the rope finally came loose. My grip weakened from relief, and still holding the girl, I fell over forwards.

Before I knew it, her face was very close by. Thanks to the moonlight and my eyes getting accustomed to the darkness, I could perceive it clearly.

However, my senses couldn't accept it.

Such a thing couldn't have happened, I told myself, stubbornly denying what my sensory functions told me. But at the same time, I thought this:

So, the time has finally come.

I said her name. For the first time in three years.

"Hajikano."

The girl opened her eyes. Sweat made her hair stick to her cheek and neck, and due to her coughing, her eyes were faintly clouded.

"…Yosuke?", Hajikano said in a hoarse voice.

Our breathing was all out of sorts. At first, I thought that was the reason why no further words came out. But even after I stopped panting, I couldn't speak. My throat was dry like I'd gulped down a bucket of seawater.

I had thought I'd be brimming with things to say. When I got to reunite with Hajikano, I'd have so much I wanted to tell her that I wouldn't know where to start. That was my expectation.

But the reality was exactly the opposite. Not a single peep came from my open mouth.

I couldn't accept the reality I saw before me.

On Hajikano's face, there was a giant birthmark.

"Move it," she said.

Coming back to my senses, I released my arm from around her back and stood up as if backing away. Hajikano sluggishly raised herself, put her hands on her knees to stand, and wiped off some dirt from her clothes. She coughed a few times, and without a word of thanks for saving her, passed me by toward the entrance of the park.

I couldn't follow after her. I couldn't even turn around, standing there like an idiot, watching the swing sway with a shrill sound.

I don’t know how long I was listening to it.

Once my head finally started working, I had lost sight of Hajikano, and almost felt like I could dismiss the prior events as a dream. But the rope hanging from the swingset bar and the scattered pile of books on the ground wouldn’t allow me to. They firmly insisted that someone who had sought death was here.

The clouds blocked the moonlight, and the park fell into a thick darkness. The swing finally came to a stop, but the reverberation of that rusty metal sound stayed there forever.

From far away, I heard the sound of a telephone.

My feet moved before I could think. With such recklessness that another injury which took fourteen weeks to heal wouldn’t have been surprising, I all but tumbled down the stone steps. At the last ten steps, I made a big leap to the ground. Trying to force my breathing to calm down, I listened closely to search for the phone.

What are you doing?, echoed a voice in my head. *What’s your top priority? Shouldn’t you focus on going after Hajikano, not asking that woman for more information? What should you really be doing? You can’t count on the notion that if she failed a suicide attempt, it’ll take some time before she gets the resolve to try again. Hajikano got clean away from you, and now she could be hanging herself somewhere else right away. And the biggest problem is, Hajikano didn’t run away from you.* You ran away from Hajikano. *You got all timid, seeing her so different. You decided it was beyond you and flinched. The proof is, when Hajikano walked away without even a glance at you - that’s right, you were relieved. I’m glad she didn’t speak to me, you thought. If you don’t go after her now, you’ll run next time, too. And the next next time, and the next next next time. Are you satisfied with that? Are you really satisfied with that?*

I’ll ask again. What’s your top priority?

My feet stopped.

I heard the ringing coming from a phone booth on a street corner.

If I had any questions, like why I could pick up on the ringing even when it was so far away and coming from inside a phone booth, those thoughts were instantly blown away by the small, distant sight of Hajikano past a downward slope lined with streetlights. If I ran as fast as I could, maybe I could still catch up to her. But simultaneously I wondered, what would I do when I did? What should I say to her? How in the world do you treat a girl who was about to kill herself just a few minutes ago?

As I hesitated with my hand on the door to the booth, Hajikano grew ever distant. Just as I was giving up and telling myself she was too far to catch up to now, I noticed an abandoned bicycle left on the roadside. Probably has a lock on it, so it's no use - I pushed it out of my mind. *Whoa, whoa,* the voice in my head panicked. *Why are you saying that without trying? Look, just look at it, do you see a lock anywhere on that? Probably some brat stole it, rode it out here, and ditched it, no way there's a lock on it. And if you felt like it, couldn't you answer the phone, talk to that woman, and then chase after Hajikano? Why won't you do that?*

Admit it. You don't want to go after Hajikano.

Hajikano vanished into the darkness.

I entered the phone booth, and powerlessly picked up the receiver.

"So, how do you feel about your birthmark having gone?", the woman asked.

"Already forgot about it. There's been events with far more impact since."

"I see," she said with a meaningful laugh. "In any event, the conditions are in order. Your birthmark is gone, you have reunited with the one you love. Now, I will look forward to August 31st."

I let out a shaky sigh.

"Hey, I had a question…"

"What is it?"

"Hajikano's face," I said. "*Where the hell did that birthmark come from?*"

I heard the click of a receiver being put down.

I placed the phone back, slumping against the wall down to the floor, looking up at the ceiling.

Not five seconds later, the phone rang again. I reached up to take the call.

"I forgot to tell you one crucial thing."

"Don't worry, it's definitely not just one."

"Happy sixteenth birthday."

With that, the woman hung up.

“Thanks for that,” I spoke at the unconnected receiver.

I left the phone booth and searched through my pocket for a crumpled cigarette pack. Sticking a bent cig in my mouth, I lit it. The filter stuck to my dry lips, peeling the skin and making blood run, leaving a stain like lipstick on the white filter.

This is getting real troublesome now, I thought like I was just an observer to it all, taking my first puff.

And such is how my summer of age sixteen began.

Chapter 3: The Mermaid of Agohama

When I opened the door, a foul smell wafted over. A smell like rotten vegetables. I took off my shirt and socks to throw them in the washing machine, and in the living room, I saw my mom asleep using folded cushions as a pillow. On the table were strewn peanut shells, and liquor spilling out from a toppled teacup covered the table and dripped from the edge. Small moths flew around the lights in the room, and the TV was left on a news channel.

I got a cloth and wiped off the table, and repeatedly whapped the stains on the carpet with paper towels. As I went back and forth between the kitchen and living room, my mom showed no sign of waking. No matter how much I wiped, the table just wouldn't get any less sticky, so I eventually gave up on it.

Opening the refrigerator, I found white cabbage starting to turn black, radishes which were too late to save, eggs over a week past expiration date, and an open bag of bean sprouts. As I thawed some frozen-solid pork in a frying pan and chopped some vegetables, my finally-awake mother spoke from the living room, "Water, please," in a drunk-sounding voice.

I filled a cup with cold water and took it to her. She sat up, drank it in one gulp, said "Sorry," and fell back on the floor.

After dinner, while I was doing washing, mom came into the kitchen. She stood beside me, not to help me out or anything, but just staring sleepily at my face. And, over thirty seconds later, she finally noticed the change in her son.

"Oh, your face…"
"Yeah," I said. "When I woke up this morning, it was gone."

She came closer and examined my face in detail. Probably suspected it was just cosmetics or something.

After a thorough inspection, she happily slapped my back.

"Well, isn't that great? All that treatment took effect. Going to all those hospitals was worth it after all."

Don't be stupid, I thought to myself. It's not like a pimple or freckles. All the doctors we went to had a dissatisfied frown, and insinuated that I'd just have to find some way to live with it. They told us that even if I had healthy skin transplanted, the birthmark was highly likely to

appear again in the same spot. For such a mark to vanish overnight - you're calling it "all that treatment taking effect"?

"Don't you think it's weird?", I asked. "The last time I even went to a dermatologist was over two years ago."

"Yes, yes. It's surely strange. Why, if it were the effects of treatment, I could understand if it healed over time. But going away overnight, now, that isn't normal. You may just have to call it a miracle, in fact."

Mom took a swig from her teacup, and threw three peanuts into her mouth.

"But, Yosuke. You ought to forget about your birthmark now. When it comes to such extraordinary luck, it's best to leave it be. At times like this, you just say "it's luck, no big deal.""

I felt there was truth to that. But it only applied if you weren't certain about where the good luck came from. My luck had a clear source.

"You should let your happiness show. Don't go fearing that you're celebrating prematurely and will be disappointed later. Celebrating knowing the risk of disappointment is the smart thing to do."

I didn't respond, and instead pointed to the teacup in her hand. "I thought you were quitting drinking as of July?"

"It's water," she transparently lied. "Just water."

I took away the cup and gulped down its contents. My throat heated up, and the smell of potatoes gone bad filled my stomach. I vaguely wanted to puke. Honestly, what about this was tasty?

"What a delinquent son," chastised my mother, filling the reclaimed cup with liquor again.

"It's just water," I insisted.

I lied on my side and closed my eyes, but glimpses of the past few hours under my eyelids made it seem impossible to sleep. I went to the living room, took one of the cigarette packs from the second dresser drawer, and returned to my room. Turning the lights off, I lit one up. Not wanting the smoke to fill the room, I opened up the screen door, stuck my head out, and was met with a damp soil smell.

The image of Hajikano's face was burned into my sight. There was a huge bruise on her face. A bluish-black mark, the spitting image of the birthmark I'd had before.

I decided not to think about how it had gotten there. Maybe it happened naturally, maybe it didn't. I wouldn't say I couldn't make any guesses, necessarily… but just thinking about it wouldn't get me a definite answer. What was worth thinking about was what that mark, whatever the reason for its appearance, had wrought on her.

Hajikano had been attempting suicide in that park. That I could tell. Was it indeed that birthmark which led her to such measures? Was she so distraught about her appearance, she decided to hang herself?

Even if we're being modest, Hajikano was truly one of the most beautiful girls in this town. Everyone aspired to her, everyone was jealous of her, everyone envied her. She must have been at least somewhat aware of all that herself. She wasn't someone who cared nothing for the subtle feelings of others. She couldn't have*not* known that the beauty she possessed warped the meaning of the word "beauty" with how much it surpassed it.

How in the world would she feel having that beauty tainted? I couldn't even imagine. If the birthmark I had was a stain on a mat, hers was a stain on a pure white dress. Though the same color and size, they didn't have the same significance. The mental impact of the latter was incomparable to the former. It wasn't unreasonable to think Hajikano became highly pessimistic for her future.

On the other hand, I felt something amiss with this conclusion. Would Hajikano consider suicide over such an event? Beauty was only but one of her charms. Ever since I first came to know her, I knew she possessed deep insight, especially for a grade-schooler. Her words were full of wisdom, she was very studious, and she was even above-average athletically. She read lots of books, and listened to music older than even her parents knew. At minimum, she had twenty times the sense I did, surely.

Would someone like her turn to suicide just because her beauty was tarnished?

I'll go see Hajikano after school tomorrow, I thought. In everything I pondered about, I was lacking information. Once we met and talked, everything could be made clear, and we could decide what direction to take next.

I felt great unease, but the second I decided I'd meet Hajikano, part of me was excited. Regardless of how it was happening, I would get to be part of her life again. The day we graduated elementary school, I thought I would quickly forget Hajikano once we'd gone our separate ways. Yet taking off the lid now, I found those feelings had only grown stronger over the three years.

In a sense, I had been waiting for this day to come for a long time.

I put out my cigarette and went to the living room to put it in an ashtray. Then I kneeled down in front of the dresser and checked my face.

People who have nothing have one strong point: they have nothing to lose. Once you have just one thing precious to you, you're always tormented by the fear of losing it.

As proof of that fact, I was afraid. Of the birthmark coming back to my face, and of a return to my drab life.

*

The next morning, I came to a sudden stop outside of the Class 1-3 classroom.

I had always hated the moment of opening the classroom door. That trend had only become more obvious as I aged.

It was possible for everything to change in just one night. Any such changes would become clear the instant I opened the door. What had been a peaceful mood yesterday could be painful today, those who yesterday seemed like the center of the class could become outcasts, people who had been kind acquaintances yesterday could lay traps today… Basically, anything from yesterday wouldn't necessarily be the same today. So when I stood in front of the door every morning, I felt like I was turning over a rock on the seashore. There could be a shell that sparkled like a gem stuck to it, or a repulsive sea louse could come crawling out.

Taking a quiet deep breath, I opened the door. I didn't see Chigusa anywhere, but Nagahora noticed me and beckoned. I nodded, put my bag down by my desk, and went over to him.

Nagahora was in a group of, including him, three boys and two girls, chatting and laughing. It seemed he was trying to get me to join the circle. I knew he was doing it out of good will, and it really was the sort of thing someone like me would need right now, but somewhere in my heart, I was fed up with it. I didn't like talking with this many people at once.

"Fukamachi, wasn't it?", said one of the girls, tall and with a clean-cut face. "Are your legs all right? Sounds like you were hospitalized for quite a while."

"It's nothing now," I answered. "I'd pretty much recovered by the end of June. I was just hiding out 'til exams were over."

The five of them laughed all together, and Nagahora poked my chest. "Not bad, man!"

"We were talking about a test of courage," someone said. It was a boy with short hair and

darkish skin, who definitely gave the impression of a baseball player. “Have you ever heard of the abandoned hotel at the foot of the mountain?”

“Oh, the Red-Room Ruins, right?”

The instant I spoke, the group of five stopped laughing. Did I say something awkward? Nervousness filled me.

“Red room?”, Nagahora asked.
“Yeah. Deep in the hotel, there’s a red room.”

“First I’ve heard of it…” In constrast to the other girl, the girl who spoke had a small and plain face, and her eyes sparkled behind glasses. “What’s that about?”

“It’s not that interesting. It’s a room with a corner spraypainted red, that’s all. It might surprise you if you see it in the dark, but it’s just what it sounds like, a red room.”

“You sure know about it,” remarked the short-haired boy. “Have you gone in there?”

I hesitated briefly, but I decided to answer honestly. “Yeah. A friend took me in middle school.”

“I want to know more,” begged the girl with glasses.

“There was a chair in the center of the room, and a mannequin sitting in it.” I gradually found myself speaking more smoothly. As if thanks to the loss of my birthmark, I could suddenly carry a natural conversation. “It seems like someone periodically comes to dress her up, so from day to day, she might be in the First High uniform, or in a swimsuit.”

The short-haired boy clapped his hands together. “That sounds cool! Feel like going all of a sudden.”

“That’s not all,” I proceeded upon seeing the group’s reaction. “In the room next to it, there’s an old, but pretty clean bed. And around it, there’s a *bunch* of tossed-out stuff that’s barely even been used.”

At this, the three boys cheered, and the girl with glasses knit her brows, but didn’t seem entirely displeased.

The tall girl seemed to be the only one who didn’t understand. “*What* was thrown away?”, she innocently asked.

“Well, it’s not crackers or bingo cards…” The other boy who hadn’t opened his mouth thus

far, pale and with average looks, spoke quietly. “And it’s not bags of candy.”

“I don’t understand. Are you making fun of me?” The tall girl glared at him.

“Tonight,” said Nagahora. “I can’t wait any longer than that. We’ll go see it tonight. You lead us, Fukamachi.”

“Tonight?”, I repeated. “Oh, sorry, but after school today…”

“Hey, did Fukamachi just get called?” The girl with glasses put her hand to her ear.

We stopped talking at once. Indeed, my name was being repeated on the school intercom.

“That’s Kasai’s voice,” said the pale boy.

“Right at the good part,” the glasses girl pouted. “See you, Fukamachi.”

As I left, Nagahora asked from behind me. “You don’t think you can come to a test of courage tonight?”

“Unfortunately,” I affirmed. “Besides, it’s more tense without someone who’s seen it all before.”

After leaving the classroom, I put a relieved hand to my chest.

Today’s rock seemed to be hiding a shell rather than a sea louse.

*

“Do you know why I called you in?”

Throughout my life, I must have heard at least thirty questions along those lines. Why do you think I called you in? You know what I’m going to say, right? Can you tell me what you did wrong? I wonder where all school staff learned those roundabout turns of phrase. Did they have training, or did they just naturally pick them up scolding such a large number of students?

In stark contrast to yesterday, Kasai’s attitude was cool and indifferent. He had an elbow on his desk and his chin in his hand, clicking a pen with the nervousness of a nicotine addict who hadn’t had a smoke all day.

“I don’t know,” I answered. I didn’t know why exactly, but Kasai seemed irritated with me. Better to not say much and watch things unfold here.

“I see.” He shook his head as if disappointed, spinning his chair to face me. “But try thinking about it some more. I wouldn’t have called you in here for no reason, right? I don’t have the time for that kind of thing.”

“Then you should just tell me, please. I said I don’t know, and I won’t suddenly know it either. I don’t personally remember doing anything worth blame to anyone.”

There were plenty of people going in and out of the faculty room in the morning, and a few people snuck looks at me as I confronted Kasai with his restless eyes. It was difficult to call it a pleasant situation. I wanted to settle this before any classmates saw it.

“Suppose it wouldn’t be too strange.” Kasai took a sip from his cup of coffee. “Alright, I’ll make it quick. Do you know who sits in the seat one up and right of yours?”

He said he’d make it quick, yet it was a leading question. But it wasn’t as if I couldn’t answer. I recalled the layout of the classroom yesterday. Nagahora was in front of me, Chigusa was to my right, and up and to the right was an empty seat.

“I don’t know. Because whoever it was seemed to be absent yesterday.”

“Yes,” Kasai nodded. “And again today, it seems. We got a call from her parents earlier.”

I couldn’t read where this was going. What relation was he saying there was between me, who attended for the first time yesterday, and a student prone to absences?

“And?”, I pressed.

“So you don’t even know that…” Kasai looked stunned. He scratched the back of his neck and sighed.

“For a while now, she’s had insistent requests. "Change me to another class, it doesn’t matter which.” “I can’t say why, but just let me leave this class.” Of course, we can’t listen to selfish requests from every student. If we made one exception, we’d have to make another, and wind up submitting to everyone’s demands. So we just said to put up with it for a year. And she seemed to have accepted that well enough.“

Even as Kasai explained, he watched me attentively. As if he were waiting for me to make a sudden slip-up.

"But this morning, we got a call. And then we finally knew. Why did she loathe this class so much? And why could she put up with it and attend until two days ago?”

I silently waited for the rest.

“According to what her mother said…” Kasai finally got to the point.

“*Yui Hajikano refuses to be in a classroom with Yosuke Fukamachi*.”

I felt like all the air had left my lungs.

“What did you do to Hajikano?”

Coughing out weak breaths and taking in the musty air of the faculty room, I finally managed to speak.

“Yui Hajikano? Yui Hajikano is in Class 1-3?”

Kasai snorted. He probably thought I was trying to feign ignorance.

“You should have gotten the roster back in April. You never checked it once? You would’ve had plenty of time in the hospital.”

Several thoughts crossed my mind, but careful not to let them show on my face, I just said “So she is…”

“And?”, he immediately pressed. “Let me ask you again. Do you know any reason why Hajikano would want to avoid you?”

Reflexively, scenes from last night popped up in the back of my mind. The long stone stairs, the desolate shrine park, the swings, the pile of books, the tightening rope, and her birthmark.

Thinking about the birthmark again delayed my reply. Kasai didn’t let it escape his sight. From that subsecond pause, he perceived that I did have some idea.

“I’d like to know that myself,” I said as naturally as I could. “I haven’t been in contact with Hajikano at all since entering middle school. We were together for a short time in grade school, but I think we both thought of each other as good friends at the time. So I don’t have any ideas why she would be avoiding me.”

“Then how would you explain the reason for Hajikano’s absences?”
“I don’t know. Please, ask her.”

Kasai pressed the pen to his temple.

“I know it’s not fair to dig up the past, but… As someone who knows all the trouble you caused in middle school, I have no choice but to dig deep. You understand?”

Aha. So that was the reason for Kasai’s conclusive behavior. No doubt he had spun a story in his mind about me and my delinquent friends bullying Hajikano in elementary school, or something along those lines.

“I understand what you’re saying. It’s reasonable to be suspicious of me,” I partially conceded. “However, as far as this goes, I insist there must be some kind of mistake. Please, ask Hajikano again.”

“We intend to, of course.”

Just as the conversation was wrapping up, the chime to start class rang.

“You can head back,” Kasai told me. “Though I’m thinking I’ll have to talk to you again later.”

I wordlessly turned my back and left the faculty room behind me.

When I got back to my seat, Chigusa looked up at me like she was dying to say something. After the incident with Kasai, I was on alert. Maybe she too would have some blame to cast at me from a totally unexpected direction.

“Morning,” I greeted as a diversion.
“Good morning.” Chigusa bowed her head. It was a somehow cold greeting.

“Um, thanks for yesterday,” I said warily.
“Don’t mention it,” she replied rather mechanically.

There was an uncomfortable silence.

I first imagined that the ultimately baseless rumor that I had bullied Hajikano had begun spreading somehow. Next I considered that I had done something to upset Chigusa without realizing, and while thinking back on my interactions with her, she spoke indifferently.

“Fukamachi, you seemed to be greatly enjoying yourself a while ago.”

She reminded me of the talk about the ruins I’d been having with Nagahora and his friends, before Kasai called me to the faculty room. His questioning had completely taken away the happiness I’d gotten from that.

I was relieved to realize the reason for Chigusa's sullen mood. Maybe she didn't like Nagahora's friends, or wasn't one for the mood that came about when they came together. I know I didn't really care to become too familiar with their circle.

"We were talking about that ruined hotel," I explained. "They're going to go there as a test of courage. I told them I'd done something like that in middle school and what it was like, and they were delighted."

"Are you going with them, Fukamachi?"
"Nah. They invited me, but I have plans after school."
"I see."

She cleared her throat.

"Erm, Fukamachi. Let's try that again."

I tilted my head in confusion. Chigusa said "Good morning, Fukamachi," and a kind smile came to her lips.

Ah, I get it.

"Thanks for yesterday," I told her again.

"Don't mention it." Her eyes beamed with satisfaction. "As usual, please don't hesitate to depend on me."

"I'll do that. By the way…" I pointed at the seat diagonal from mine. "Is that Yui Hajikano's desk?"

Chigusa blinked, then nodded.

"Yes, that is Hajikano's desk, but you have yet to…" She trailed off and looked up. "Are you acquainted with her?"

"Yeah. We were classmates in elementary school."
"Is that so?"

Chigusa perceived the change in my expression and nodded thoughtfully.

"From that look, I'm supposing you were not simply classmates."

"Nah," I shook my head weakly. "We were just classmates."

I couldn't get into my morning classes at all. I stared at my blank notes and reflected on my meeting with Kasai. Chigusa talked to me each break, but I could only give her the most unenergetic responses.

While I was changing before third period gym class, I casually asked Nagahora something.

"Hey, I wanted to ask about the girl who sits next to you…"

"Next to me… Yui Hajikano?", he asked as he unbuttoned his shirt. "The girl with that big bruise on her face?"

"Bruise?", I repeated without thinking.

That was a surprising reply. If Nagahora knew about it, Hajikano's bruise must have been there some time earlier.

"So what about Hajikano?"
"Oh, she's just an old acquaintance."

"Hmm." He took off his T-shirt and replaced it with his P.E. shirt. "What's your question, then?"

I thought for a second, then changed my question. "How long has she had that bruise?"

"How long?" Nagahora stopped to think. "I dunno. She had it when I first met her."

"…I see. Thanks."
"No prob," Nagahora nodded.

If he was telling the truth, Hajikano had that mark on her face as of April. I grew increasingly confused.

Let's try to sort this out. Hajikano, I'm told, doesn't want to meet me. And this wasn't just something sudden this morning; since a while ago - perhaps the moment she learned she'd be in the same class as me - she made requests of Kasai. So Hajikano avoiding me and the events of last night were unrelated. It wasn't simply anger for interfering with her suicide, or not wanting to look me in the eye after I'd witnessed such a shameful act.

So, how exactly did Yui Hajikano come to despise Yosuke Fukamachi?

I had no guesses - is what I wanted to say, but I did have one theory.

Was Hajikano's birthmark the same one that had vanished from my face?

Had Hajikano's beauty been temporarily taken as collateral for the bet?

Thinking back on it, the woman had called it a "bet," yet there were no apparent stakes. But what if the "money" had already been paid, without my knowledge? And it wasn't taken directly from me, but indirectly, from Hajikano?

And what if Hajikano found out she was being used as chips in a bet?

From this point, though, it was completely within the realm of fantasy. After all, Hajikano's birthmark had been there before mine went away. In order for my theory to hold water, one of these had to be true:

1. The woman on the phone rewound time to take the collateral for the bet.

2. The woman on the phone had known from much earlier on that I would take the bet.

So this is where my theory fell apart. But then again, what did "logic" mean when my birthmark should have never just vanished like it did? It was futile to expect coherency from the chain of events surrounding this bet. And evaluating the actions of the woman on the phone in order to guess at her personality and "what she'd probably be thinking" would probably get me to the truth quicker.

So I imagined. One night, Hajikano was walking alone and heard a public telephone ring. Taking the receiver which seemed to beckon for her, that woman told her: "Your beauty has been made the collateral for Yosuke Fukamachi's bet." Hajikano knit her brows at the crude joke and hung up. And the next morning, she stopped in front of the mirror. A repulsive mark - yet one she felt she knew - had formed on her face. She scrubbed it with soap, but it wouldn't go away.

That afternoon, worried and perhaps after visiting the hospital, she received another call from that woman. She informed her: "That is the birthmark which was originally on Yosuke Fukamachi's face."

A doubt naturally occurred to me here. Was there any reason to take such a roundabout method? I considered it from her position, and came to the conclusion which seemed to follow.

Maybe she was trying to test something. To see whether or not, the way Hajikano once did for me, I could treat Hajikano equally when she was robbed of her beauty.

“Fukamachi.” Chigusa poked my shoulder. “Is your pondering going to go on much longer?”

I was dragged back to reality, and the tumult of the classroom returned. Before I knew it, it was already lunch.

“Nah.” I did a little stretch leaning back on the back of my chair. “I’ll stop now.”

Chigusa grinned and bent to come closer to my desk.

While eating lunch and having a rambling discussion, Nagahora came back from the store, said “I’m gonna intrude,” and placed a chair in front of us. “Yes, you are intruding,” said Chigusa, but she moved her lunch box to make space for him. They got along.

As the three of us finished eating, Nagahora spoke up.

“Don’t you think everyone seems restless today?”
“Are they?” Chigusa took a look around.

“Since it’s only Fukamachi’s second day, maybe he wouldn’t know, but everyone’s standing on their heels. Because there’s a big event coming.”

I thought about what was on the schedule of events for July.

“Event… Oh, you mean the sports tournament on Saturday?”
“Yeah, there’s that. But that’s not what I’m talking about.”

Chigusa answered for me. “Now is about the time for them to announce the results of the Miss Minagisa competition.”

“Oh, I see,” I nodded. I’d completely forgotten such an event even existed.

“It’s effectively a beauty contest where everyone in the school is eligible. I’m impressed they can keep an event like that up every year.”

“By the way, I voted for Ogiue,” Nagahora carelessly remarked.
“I’m not pleased.”

Chigusa glared at him, but he paid it no mind and turned to me.

“Hey, who would you vote for, Fukamachi?”

I took a look around the room, then looked back at the girl beside me.

“Let’s see… Maybe I would have voted for Ogiue, too.”

As long as we’re exempting Hajikano, I mentally appended.

Nagahora put his arm around me. “See?” He shot Chigusa a smug look.

“Why me, exactly?”, she asked, cheeks turning slightly red.
“You seem like a good swimmer,” I replied.
“What does that mean?”
“It means you’re also the prettiest,” Nagahora interpreted.
“…Well, thank you,” sighed Chigusa.

In the summer festival held every year in Minagisa from August 26th to 28th, on the night of the second day, it was customary for that year’s “Miss Minagisa” to do a reading of the mermaid legend passed down in our town, and sing the so-called “Mermaid’s Song.” That role was the highlight of the whole festival, and you were required to be an unmarried woman born in Minagisa to be eligible.

Every year, she was selected from students of Minagisa First High… due to the fact that in such a rural town, it was apparently rather embarrassing to be unmarried, so non-students avoided the role like the plague. Because standing in front of people as Miss Minagisa meant screeching to the world “I’m an unmarried woman.” In addition, many legends about mermaids are tragic stories, and Minagisa’s was no exception. So being chosen as Miss Minagisa came to be seen as a jinx on your chances of marriage.

The legend of The Mermaid of Agohama was, to put it simply, like taking the legend of Yaobikuni told in Fukui Prefecture, adding it to Hans Christian Andersen’s The Little Mermaid, and dividing it by two.

Yaobikuni is a girl who eats mermaid flesh and becomes immortal, and runs away to wander the land for eight hundred years. The Little Mermaid leaves the sea for the first time on her fifteenth birthday, and has a forbidden love with a human. And The Mermaid of Agohama… is basically if the witch from The Little Mermaid were replaced with Yaobikuni.

What’s interesting is, if the records are correct, The Mermaid of Agohama already existed over two centuries before Andersen wrote The Little Mermaid. And if, again, you compare it to that, it is intriguing how it shows the story from the side of the witch, not the mermaid. That’s why Minagisa is putting in all that futile effort placing mermaid statues around town, promoting itself as the “Mermaid Town” to attract tourists. But as of today, I’ve yet to see any sufficiently tourist-y tourists.

It’s said that until her death, Yaobikuni retained her appearance from when she was fifteen or sixteen. The Little Mermaid fell in love with a human on her fifteenth birthday. So that’s one more reason you could say it’s appropriate to have high school students reciting The Mermaid of Agohama.

I felt that Chigusa would be appropriate as Miss Minagisa because the slight unfortunate air about her seemed to harmonize with the tragic nature of The Mermaid of Agohama. Of course, I didn’t say that to her face. She probably wouldn’t be pleased being complimented in such a way.

Just as Nagahora predicted, at the end of lunch break, the results for the Miss Minagisa contest were announced on the intercom. After some dramatic buildup, the announcer read the winner’s name.

“Class 1-3, Chigusa Ogiue.”

Chigusa’s face froze.

For a moment, silence fell on the classroom. It was ultimately broken by Nagahora’s applause. The rest of the class followed it up, as if guided by his.

From the sound of the applause, it seemed as if everyone in the class was celebrating Chigusa’s selection from deep down. They didn’t choose her for the sake of harassment - and there had been times I was put into the spotlight in middle school out of ill will, which is why it came to mind. No, they all voted for her because they felt that Chigusa, bringing to mind a beautiful, misfortunate girl, was the most fitting choice for a tragic heroine. The same way Nagahora and I had seen it.

Chigusa herself, in the middle of the noise, hung her head and paled. Nagahora and I called her name several times, but she didn’t respond. Thus, I decided to change up the approach. We had been calling her Ogiue, but I switched to “Chigusa.”

Chigusa suddenly looked up at me.

“Sorry, I was a little bewildered. I’m all right.”

“If you don’t want to go out in front of people, you can turn it down. Nobody’ll blame you,” I told her.

“It’s nothing that severe. I was just a bit surprised.”

“No need to worry about it,” Nagahora said playfully. “If you really don’t wanna do it, I’ll

take your place.”

“It’s unmarried women only,” she retorted with a pained smile. But thanks to him, her spirits seemed to be lifted a little.

Yet for the remainder of the day, Chigusa seemed visibly more mature. During classtime, she was inattentive, staring out the window with a gloomy expression. By the end of sixth period, she still wasn’t back to normal. When I told her “Well, see you tomorrow,” she shook as if brought back to reality, then just put on a fake smile and waved. “Yes, see you tomorrow.”

She must be pretty bad about going out in front of others, I thought at the time. Later, it would become clear that I was completely off the mark, but there wasn’t much I could do about that. To fully figure out what she was thinking with only the information I had then would have been absurd indeed.

Yes, it was more than just the reason for Chigusa turning so pale when chosen as Miss Minagisa. There were actually many things about her I didn’t know at that point. The clues were scattered around, but I just didn’t have the time to stop and give them all a good look.

*

Smoking a cigarette in secret taxes your nerves. The surprisingly difficulty of finding somewhere where no one’s watching, despite the population - that’s a rural town. There are people here and there so starved for excitement they make a hobby of sitting by the window and watching passersby all day, and they’ll joyfully run out of the house at even the slightest change. As soon as one person goes out, people whiffing the smell of bustle come out one after another. And then you get a good hour or so of people standing around talking, no longer sure whether the oddity was real or just mistaken.

I put out the cigarette with my foot, left the park bathroom that stunk of ammonia, and filled my lungs with fresh air. From the asphalt came a dry smell, and from the thicket by the road, a choking smell of greenery. I wiped the sweat dripping down my cheek, and resumed walking in search of Hajikano’s house.

What I remembered was the sound of rain. And not a small rain, but the kind that would get you wet up to your knees even if you had an umbrella. The first time I visited her house was around this same time, an afternoon in the middle of July, known for its unstable weather.

That day, there was a huge storm unpredicted by the weather forecast. There were lazy people like me who always neglected to bring their umbrellas home and just left them at school, but most of the students had to wait for their parents to pick them up.

Hajikano was methodical about bringing her things home, so she was of course the latter. But

when she found out I had an umbrella, she kept repeating “I sure would be glad if someone could walk me home… I mean, it’d be so boring standing here for two hours until dad shows up!”

And so, I decided to take Hajikano to her house. Most of the boys gave up on going home and went to the gym, most of the girls formed groups and talked, those without friends fled to the library, and some with screws loose went running barefoot on the field. But out of all of them, only Hajikano and I were headed for the entrance.

At the time, rather unusually, we’d had… not quite a fight, but a minor argument, and were thus in a situation where it was hard to talk to each other. My anger toward her had long since vanished without a trace, but unable to find a chance to break the ice, I was looking for a way to reconcile with her.

I think, perhaps, she was in a similar state. And then the rainstorm came. As I watched it through the window, Hajikano stood just a little closer to me than usual. “The forecast was wrong,” she said. “Now I’ll finally remember to bring home my umbrella,” I said.

A few minutes later, we were back to keeping the usual distance.

We left the entrance, and I opened the umbrella. Hajikano ducked under it, and laughed as if tickled.

The moment we stepped past the overhang, fierce raindrops hit the umbrella. Water splashed at our feet with every step, and every breeze shook the umbrella and sloshed lots of water off. This road that normally would have been crowded with students returning home now only had the two of us walking down it.

If it weren’t for that rain, I think our reconciliation would have come a little later.

Occasionally, Hajikano’s left hand touched my right, but what stayed more strongly in my memory was the feel of my soaked shoes. Interactions with Hajikano had been very rare until then, but for some reason, I only thought of cicadas. Where do the cicadas go during big rainstorms? Of course, it wasn’t just cicadas I wasn’t sure about, but also what sparrows, butterflies, cats, and bears were up to, yet I felt the most concern about cicadas. They don’t even have a month to live, so how must it feel for a whole day of their life to be spoiled by rain?

Even past 3 PM, visibility was bad enough that even the many bicycles coming and going had to blink their headlights. It was fine while going up and down slopes, but not five minutes after reaching a flat path, we were hit with three sprays of muddy water from passing cars. For the first one, I was on the side of the car, serving as a wall for Hajikano, so she didn’t get

too wet. But the second one got us both so soaked, it felt idiotic to even bother putting up an umbrella. By the third, well, we hardly thought anything of it.

Still, I didn't let go of that umbrella, my free ticket to get close to Hajikano. Thanks to the rain reducing visibility such that no one was watching, I could even forget about my birthmark. If only the world could always be like this, I thought. Being able to see certain things so clearly makes life hard. If the world were more dim and fuzzy, maybe people would be a little more fair to judge things, not relying on the impressions their eyes give them.

"Here it is," Hajikano told me, and I stopped. On the sides of the gate were hydrangeas of many colors, shaking from the blows of raindrops. Apparently, this was Hajikano's house.

"Thanks for escorting me," she said, bowing her head.
"But there wasn't any point to the umbrella after all, huh. We look like we've gone for a swim."
"That's fine. It was fun."

Hajikano opened the sliding door to go inside, but suddenly remembered something and turned around.

"Can I ask you to take shelter inside?"
"Thanks, but no thanks. My house is just a quick jog away."

What I didn't say was, "I doubt your parents would give the nicest look if you invited me, a guy with an ugly birthmark like this, inside as a friend."

"Okay… I guess that's fair." Hajikano scratched her chin with her finger.
"Yeah. Well, see you tomorrow."

As I turned to leave, Hajikano grabbed my sleeve between her fingers.

She whispered close to my ear. "You're not angry?"
"I never was. What about you?", I asked back.
"I was never angry, either." She let go with a relieved look.

"Be careful."
"Uh-huh. Take care of yourself."

Not long after parting, the rain eased up. And less than five minutes after that, it completely stopped. Yet I didn't so much as think "If only I'd stayed at school a little longer, I wouldn't have gotten wet at all."

Starting with that, however small a step it was, our friendship moved forward. The proof of

that being, after that, we started walking to school together. Every morning, I visited Hajikano's house. She always came out no more than ten seconds after I rang the doorbell. When the door opened, there was a strange smell from inside the house. All houses do have their own unique smell to them, but Hajikano's made me think of gentle happiness (no particular reason, but it's really what I thought, so what else can I say?). I just thought, if happiness had a smell, it would be something like this.

Hajikano would put on her shoes, check her clothes and hair, and never fail to say "I'm off" to her family in the living room. Her clothes seemed mature at a glance, and if you paid attention, you'd notice they were all far more refined than the kind of things you could buy in the area. I wondered if her mother thought of her like a dress-up doll. Anyone with a daughter like this would probably feel the urge to go shopping.

I visited Hajikano's house every morning, but never did I go any further than the front door. If I'd said I wanted to, she probably would have let me; if she told me to, I would have done so. But it didn't feel necessary. In fact, it felt like a waste for our relationship to become one where we could so easily go in and out of each other's houses. As a result, I never met with her parents. I figured if they never knew their daughter was considering someone with such a disgusting birthmark her friend, it wouldn't hurt them.

Why had I been so prudent about my relationship with Hajikano back then? Thinking about it, maybe I didn't want the comfortable telepathy between us to be substantiated by a close relationship. In other words, I wanted to leave our relationship at "…and yet we understand each other" instead of "…which is why we understand each other." The more distant two people are from each other, the more strongly you can feel the thread tying them together.

Though not necessarily because anything had changed, visting Hajikano's house for the first time in four years felt like I was visiting a total stranger's house. The wooden Japanese-style house with generally dark colors had gotten thorough upkeep, yet it was unable to totally escape the passage of time, with little cracks and blemishes in places.

I rang the doorbell with a much heavier feeling weighing on me than back then. I straightened my shirt sleeves, waiting for someone to answer, but there was no response of any kind. I rang the doorbell again and leaned on a pole.

Beside the doorbell was a plate with the names of all the family members in bombastic writing. A particularly large tree in the garden seemed to be a favorite of the cicadas, and their buzzing came down from the leaves, shaking the trunk. Maybe on that stormy day, the cicadas had taken shelter here, I considered. I was about to reach into my bag for a cigarette, but I couldn't guarantee that Hajikano's mother wouldn't answer the moment I lit it. In skin-burningly strong sunlight, I waited patiently for someone to show up.

After a while, I heard someone slowly coming down the stairs. A woman in her early twenties opened the door. Her wavy brown hair was terribly frazzled, her skin was messy with cosmetics, and her shirt was full of creases, giving an overall unclean impression. For a moment, my mind wondered about how this bed-headed woman and Hajikano were related, and I suspected she might be a friend of hers, but then I recalled the names on the doorplate. Maybe this was Hajikano's older sister.

She rubbed her eyes and spoke sleepily. "Whaddya want?"

"Is Yui Hajikano home at the moment?"
"Who knows. Maybe she is." She yawned loudly and peered at my face. "You Yui's boyfriend?"

"No," I stated firmly.
"Stalker, then?"
"Just a friend. We were in grade school together."

"Friend, huh," she said mockingly. She scratched the back of her head.

"Even if you were an old friend of Yui's, that's all the more reason that you shouldn't meet her now. I dunno how I should explain it, but the point is, the Yui Hajikano you know isn't here."

"Yes, I realize that," I nodded. "That's why I came here to confirm something with Yui."

"Say it here. I'll tell her for you."
"I'd like to talk to her directly. Could you at least tell Yui "Yosuke Fukamachi came to visit"?"

She shook her head broadly. "She doesn't wanna meet anyone right now."

"I'm aware of that, too. However, it's because she doesn't want to meet with me that I want to meet with her."

There was a long silence. From her look, I could tell I was being appraised.

"Oh well," she snorted. "We're getting pretty fed up with her ourselves. Yosuke, eh? If you think you can do something, try it. Highly doubt it, though."

"Thank you very much."

I looked to the doorplate again. Above the name "Yui" was written the name "Aya." Aya Hajikano. That appeared to be her name.

“I’ve been sleeping all day. It’s been forever since I got a day off.”

As she guided me, Aya confessed that she’d been sleeping in the house since noon.

“I’ve been stuck in the lab for almost half a month. Things calmed down last night, and I thought I could finally sleep without any worries… Then of course you come along. Woke me right up.”

“Sorry,” I made sure to apologize.
“You could at least give me a day of rest. Couldn’t wait just a few days?”
“I could not.”

Suddenly, she sniffed around my chest. “You kinda smell like smoke. Aren’t you in high school?”

“My parents are both smokers, so I believe that’s how it got there.”

“Look, I’m not gonna blab about your personal problems, y'know.”

After going upstairs, Aya stopped in front of a room.

“This is Yui’s room,” she informed me. “Not gonna chicken out now, right?”
“Of course not.”

Aya pounded on the door. “Yui! You’re in there, right?”

There was no response.

“Due to some circumstances, I’ve gotta open this door.” She continued to knock. “I’ll count for a minute. And if time runs out, I’m opening it no matter what. That’s not just a threat, I’m really opening it. Got it?”

As expected, no response. She clicked her tongue loud enough to be heard through the door.

“Seems to be ignoring me. She’s doing it to the whole family.”

The Hajikano I knew ignoring her family was difficult to even imagine. The fact that she’d changed drastically had become apparent about ten minutes after our reunion last night, but hearing about it from her sister’s mouth forced me to acknowledge it from a whole new angle. Who could’ve predicted there would ever come a day when our Hajikano would be treated like a burden?

I kept checking the time on my watch, but at 52 seconds, Aya said “I’m coming in” and opened the door. She’s forceful, I thought with amazement as I followed behind her. I didn’t doubt that she would have busted open the door even if it had been locked.

The room felt unpleasant; darker than you’d ever imagine for it still being day, and stuffy with heat. The curtains were shut, and no lights were on, but light from the hallway illuminated the room. Unusual for an adolescent girl, her room with completely Japanese-style, and there was a faint smell of rush plants.

Hajikano lied on a futon with her back to us. Her thin shoulders showed behind a gray slip, her white legs stretched out of thin cotton shorts, and her glossy black hair drew gentle curves on the white sheets. From just that sight from behind, I saw that her beauty, which four years ago had seemed like the pinnacle, continued to grow, knowing no limit - except for one thing.

The door closed behind me. I turned around and saw we had been left alone. Aya was awfully considerate.

“What is it?”, said Hajikano with her back turned, thinking that it was Aya who had entered the room.

“It’s me.”

There was a long silence.

Being in that room, with the sunlight blocked out, in the middle of summer, brought back memories of a movie showing from elementary school. I’d completely forgotten the actual movie we watched in the gym, darkened by curtains. All I remember is that even in scenes where there was no sound, there was a constant buzzing noise. When the movie ended, and the curtains opened, and light came back through the windows… The bars on the wall, the basketball hoop, the soccer net, the volleyball stuck in the corner of the ceiling - it felt like I was seeing it all for the first time, even though I should have been familiar with it. As if the darkness and film had conspired to repaint reality.

The monotone buzzing of cicadas temporarily stopped as if screeching to a halt. Hajikano rolled over bothersomely, and looked up at me like looking into the sun. Twisting her body made her soft hair fall on her cheek and misaligned the string on her slip, but she didn’t pay it any mind.

It was hard to see clearly in the dark, but sure enough, there was a birthmark on her face.

Hajikano sat up sluggishly and approached with an uncertain gait, like she was ill. She stopped close enough for us to feel each other’s heat.

She slowly reached her hand to touch my cheek. Her chilly, delicate fingers crawled along to below my eye. She rubbed it again and again, looking for something that wasn't there. Maybe she thought if she kept rubbing, the false skin would fall away and show the birthmark she was familiar with. She was gently stroking at first, but gradually put more force.

Suddenly, I felt a burning sensation on my cheek. I quickly realized she was clawing me with her nails. When my face warped with pain, Hajikano quickly removed her hand as if coming back to her senses. Then she took a few steps back and dropped down on a mat. A sliver of light coming through the curtains illuminated the side of her face which had no mark. I saw a fleeting glimpse of a mole under her eye.

There was a sniffing sound. Hajikano sat on her knees with her legs splayed out, crying and trying to keep it quiet. I doubted she was crying out of guilt for hurting me.

I patiently waited for her to stop crying. I couldn't think of anything better than just waiting. I touched my fingers where I'd been scratched and found a little blood. The room was too sweltering, so I left the curtains closed and opened the window. I understood her feeling of preferring the dark. She was probably finding in this darkness the same reassurance I once felt in heavy rainstorms.

The curtains swelled, and cool wind blew in, flipping the pages of a thick notebook on a desk. Hajikano stood up and closed the notebook, putting it in a drawer. Then she fished around in the bottom drawer, took something inside, and came back in front of me. I prepared myself for whatever she might do, but in her hand was a band-aid. She carefully applied it to my wound, then quietly said "I'm sorry."

I felt like she might listen now.

"I heard you didn't come to school because you didn't want to be in a classroom with me. Is that true?"

"Yes," she answered. She seemed to have calmed down her tears for the time being. "If you already know, good. I don't want to see your face, Yosuke. Please leave."

I had prepared myself, but being given such a strong rejection made my chest tighten suffocatingly.

"Could you at least tell me why?"
"No real reason. It's not your fault. I've just decided to hate you."

She was practically spitting the words out. I took things another step.

“Why did you try to do what you did last night?”

She had no answer for that question.

“Is it because of *that?*”, I asked.

“You don’t need to know that,” said Hajikano. “…Your birthmark was cured. That’s good. Well, goodbye.”

Her words weren’t phrased in a thorny way, but they still stabbed through my heart. Before, she absolutely wouldn’t have used the word *cured*.

I turned my back to Hajikano and was about to leave the room. But after taking one step out the door, I turned around and asked one last question.

“Hey, Hajikano. Do you remember what you said about my birthmark in elementary school?”

She slowly shook her head.

“I don’t.”

Crushed by the denial of such a holy memory, I fled from her room. Aya was waiting for me outside, and looked at me as if asking “How’d it go?” I powerlessly shook my head. She shrugged her shoulders with a look of “Didn’t I tell you?”

*

Aya and I sat together on the porch and smoked.

“Pretty awful, wasn’t it?”, she said. “It just suddenly appeared in winter, her second year of middle school. Yui’s totally changed because of it. I think it was the summer of third year… Around that time, she started skipping class for no reason. She managed to attend enough to graduate, but apparently had to settle for a high school a step below what she would’ve liked. Talk about a rise and fall. Shows how important appearance is to people.”

Winter, her second year of middle school… That repeated in my head. Even if the woman on the phone knew the future and that I would accept the bet (or went back in time to claim the collateral), planting the birthmark on Hajikano a whole year and a half ago seemed far too early. Maybe my whole idea that it had transferred from me to her was overthinking it.

“You shouldn’t bother with her anymore.” Aya pressed her cigarette against a can of anti-mosquito incense. “Maybe you used to be good friends before, but she’s just a shell of it now. Meeting her again will just destroy your memories.”

“Leave once you’re done with that,” she told me, and left. I went through one more cigarette, then tossed them in the can, gently touched the band-aid on my face, and left the house.

On the way home, I heard ringing from a phone booth on a street corner in the residential district. I wasn’t even surprised anymore. I entered the booth and picked up the phone.

“Hello?”

“So, your thoughts after meeting Hajikano once again?”, the woman asked. “Are you able to love Hajikano, hideous as she is now?”

I slammed the receiver down and left the booth. Can I love the now-ugly Hajikano? Of course I can. It’s not like I fell in love with her simply because she had perfect looks. Whether I could love her with that birthmark wasn’t a problem. The problem was whether *she* could love *me* without my birthmark.

From the speakers around town came a chime which played at 5 PM, to the tune of the Mermaid’s Song. Still, it looked like it would be an hour or more until sunset. Many crows flew around above the trees, cicadas made refreshing chirps. A local group of kids were being taught fire safety.

When you think about it, things had been so unusual up until now, I realized. Being a close friend with Hajikano was only the result of numerous coincidences, so realistically, it was only natural she’d treat me this way. Even suggesting that the likes of me could *console* Hajikano was too much. Thinking she could “be mine” - now that was really not knowing my place.

It seemed I was quite able to handle being rejected by Hajikano. It made me feel like a hopelessly spineless individual. The once-sparkling past changed color; I could imagine that I’d seen everything only my way, and I was never a friend of any importance to Hajikano.

Losing self-confidence all at once, I began to give up on trying to win this bet. Okay, okay, I get what you’re trying to say. Just losing my birthmark won’t make my dream come true. It was never that simple. It was a game I never had a chance of winning. And you knew that when you proposed this bet, didn’t you?

But also, if I changed my thinking, I could put it this way: in exchange for being shown my powerlessness in full, I’d gotten a great chance. At present, my circumstances at school weren’t so bad. If I built strong, trusting relationships with Chigusa and Nagahora while I could, maybe I could keep those intact even if my birthmark came back. Yes, this period of not having my birthmark was a perfect opportunity.

That woman had said the deadline was August 31st. So my fate was still postponed for over a month. I'd been given a decent amount of time.

I envisioned it. Chigusa and Nagahora, accepting me as before, even with my birthmark back. Myself, able to forget about it and laugh with my classmates.

That wouldn't be such a bad future, all told.

*

I was naive. When the woman on the phone explained the bet, she - perhaps intentionally - failed to mention an important point. She never mentioned anything about the penalty that would be given to me if I lost the bet. She knew that if she had mentioned it, I wouldn't have been on board.

Remember the story of the mermaid. Not The Mermaid of Agohama. Not Yaobikuni. But Hans Christian Andersen's fairy tale.

Andersen lived a life full of frustration and heartbreak, and with his early works especially, he had a strong tendency to write tragedies that ended with the protagonist's death. The Little Mermaid is a model example. In the eyes of Andersen at that time, his talent unknown and in the depths of poverty, it's not surprising to see it portrayed that death is the only salvation. That pessimistic outlook would reflect in your work, surely.

Now, as far as I remember, here's how the story of The Little Mermaid begins.

On her fifteenth birthday, the mermaid leaves the sea for the first time in her life and falls in love with a prince on a ship. Mermaids aren't allowed to show themselves before humans, but she refuses to give up on him. So she makes a request of a witch, and in exchange for her beautiful voice, obtains a human form. And the witch warns her: "If the prince marries another girl, you'll turn to sea foam."

Wasn't that just the situation I was in?

And what kind of ending does The Little Mermaid have?

That goes without saying.

Chapter 4: One Who Sees the Stars

I resolved, for the few days until summer break, to forget all about the bet and live the kind of life a high-schooler should. In a way, that was a simple task. All I had to do was imitate the methods of the people who had always treated me with disgust, yet a part of me could never stop aspiring to. Similar to how a language very different from your mother tongue makes you that much more conscious of its grammar, I knew a lot about their unwritten rules, even moreso than the unwritten rules of my own groups.

I began hanging out with Chigusa, Nagahora, and their friends. I had assimilated into the class in no time. What really got me to realize how drastically different my life had become was the sports tournament just before summer break. At the time I sent in my form for it, I wasn't sure if I'd be out of the hospital by then, so I was put down as a backup softball player.

I got my chance to play in the first game. At the top of the fourth, when I stepped up to plate as a pinch hitter, the crowd suddenly cheered. I looked around trying to figure out what had happened before realizing their cheers were apparently meant for me. Some volleyball girls who had rather quickly lost their game were especially lively, and unbelievably enough, shouted my name in unison. That made me completely whiff the first pitch. The cheers only got louder.

After the second pitch was a strike, things got a bit calmer. Becoming overly-conscious of the strike zone, I hit the third pitch right with the middle of the bat, and the ball went soaring off into the blue sky. Back in middle school, I had faked sick to leave school early, go to the town's only batting center, and make bets with my "friends" over this and that. But still I thought to myself, I've finally gotten to experience this for once in my life.

Leisurely coming to a stop on second base, I turned to take a peek at the crowd. It wasn't like it was the first time I'd made a long hit, but there was a clamor as if I'd scored the deciding points. Even girls I'd never talked to were waving and calling my name.

At this point even I, in all my wariness, had to admit it.

It seemed that Yosuke Fukamachi was welcome in this class.

Alas, for all their efforts, Class 1-3 was knocked out of all the competitions in round two, and didn't make it to the closing ceremony. Half of us went to watch the other class's games, while the other stayed in the classroom, soaking up the festival mood and chatting.

I had a rambling conversation with Nagahora myself, but soon those girls who had cheered for me during the game came up, poking each other, and showered me with all kinds of questions. Where do you live? Do you have any siblings? Why were you in the hospital for three months? Are you keeping up with class? What club are you in? Do you have a girlfriend? Etcetera. I was unsure how to answer every time and sought help from Nagahora, but he refused; “They’re asking you, Fukamachi!”

After the crowd left, Chigusa, who had stood outside the circle, came and sat down next to me, and asked exactly the same questions the earlier girls had. She made me repeat my answers from mere minutes ago word-for-word. When Chigusa left her seat, Nagahora asked her, “What were you hoping for there, Miss Minagisa?”, and she gave an unintelligible response: “Who knows. Maybe I just wanted to check if I’d get the same answers if I asked the same questions.”

And just like that, I caught up from my three-month delay. I made a promise to Chigusa to accompany her to her rehearsal for the Minagisa summer festival, and made plans with Nagahora and his friends to go to the beach. It felt like planning someone else’s summer vacation. Hajikano continued to be absent, and her seat front and to the right remained empty, but I forcibly pushed all the things it would make me think of out of mind. Luckily, Kasai never called me in after the second day, and I didn’t hear any public phones ringing.

On July 18th, we had our closing ceremony, and summer vacation began in earnest. I was practically glowing. I had made it to summer break doing all the things I should have done. It was hard to call things ideal, but it was a stellar accomplishment for me.

Naturally, a part of me was also sneering at this extreme turnabout. Forget personality, forget ability, forget that there’d been no real changes since I was about 14 - the fact I’d gotten all this heaped on me the moment my birthmark went away makes you want to think that appearance really is everything for people. But depending on your viewpoint, you could also consider that my life of diligent study in the hospital had unconsciously bettered my personality, or that I was simply a good match with the people at this high school. My conclusion was that even if my birthmark came back, it might not be too late to stop things from turning tragic.

*

For my first two days of summer break, I took the opportunity to enjoy some time alone. To a musician, the times when you’re listening to music and times when you’re not carry roughly equal importance; to me, time spent alone was about as important as time spent with others, if not moreso. I decided I would use those two days to cultivate a healthy longing for other people.

I got on the down train early in the morning with no particular stop in mind to get off at; I just

looked out the window, watching the scenery go by. The passengers dwindled at each stop, the average age increased, the tone of the conversations I heard became less casual. Ultimately, it was down to just me and two old people talking about things I couldn't make any sense of. When they got off at the next station, I followed suit.

I took a look at a sign at the station and found out I was in a hot springs town. There were many to choose from, and I decided to go for the smallest, cheapest one. The lobby only had a single crane game that wasn't powered on and a small shop stand. There wasn't any sign of anyone in the little open-air bath, and I relaxed there for about an hour. Birds, cicadas, water, sky, clouds; there wasn't a single thing else.

The two days passed in a blink. The day after was when I'd planned to go swimming with Nagahora at the beach, which was one of the things I was looking forward to most out of the whole break. I'd gone to look at the sea near-daily for a long time, but I'd never gotten to go there to swim and play with a bunch of friends. And the week after that was Chigusa's rehearsal for the summer festival. I didn't have any plans beyond those yet, but those two alone were more exciting than my last three summer vacations put together.

I think I'd gotten pretty carried away.

When the home phone rang that night, Chigusa's face came to mind. The day of the closing ceremony, as we left, she whispered some numbers into my ear. It was her home phone number.

"You never know when plans will suddenly come up, so…"

And so she asked me for my phone number. Thus, I'd been hoping she would call me eventually.

Having completely dropped my guard, when I heard that woman's voice on the phone, I felt like I'd been whacked in the back of the head with a blunt object. It was a failure unimaginable for the old me. I tried to steel myself for attacks from any angle, at any time, but the peacefulness of these past weeks had really made me slacken.

"Sorry to have gotten out of touch," the woman said in a clear voice that could be mistaken for a call center call if I didn't know better. "Were you disappointed it wasn't a call from the girl in your class?"

"No, I was figuring you'd be calling sooner or later," I bluffed.

"Is that right," she snickered. "How goes it? Are things going well with Hajikano?"

"You're asking that with full knowledge of the situation, aren't you?"

“I would like to know what kind of outlook *you* have on it.”

My grip on the receiver tightened.

“Same as you do. There isn’t a chance in hell of Hajikano liking me. It’s finally gotten into even my thick head. You offered me this bet knowing from the start I had no chance of success.”

“Outrageous. I only meant to make things as fair as I could.”

“Make whatever excuse you like. By the way, I’m not backing down. There may be no chance, but I won’t admit defeat just like that. I’m going to make the most of the duration of this bet.”

“Yes, I know. It is entirely at your discretion how you choose to spend the time up to the wager’s end.” The woman showed no particular sign of hurt feelings. “To make the best memories you can while you can is a fine choice.”

Something about that phrasing bothered me. Before I could locate the exact part that was odd, she interrupted my thoughts. “By the way… I’m terribly sorry, but there’s one thing I forgot to explain.”

“It’s *two* now,” I corrected. “You forget a lot of things. Seriously, you call this fair?”

The woman went on calmly. “It regards the entry fee.”

“Fee?”

“Imagine it like a game of poker,” she suggested. “I already explained to you what you would earn upon winning the bet. However, I have yet to explain what you would lose if you lost. I did not remove your birthmark simply to do a good deed. I paid that effort as the "ante,” so to speak. And to tell the truth, I have already collected the fee of participation from you.“

"Don’t remember that.” I shook my head. “What did you take from me?”

“Your soul. Just a small part.”

It took me a second to process that unexpected response.

My soul?

The woman continued, as if stacking onto a growing pile.

“To be clearer still, what I have taken is only the entry fee, and separate from the stakes I have raised. At present, the chips are in the pot. However, if you should lose the bet, I will take all of it for myself.”

“And what happens if you do that?”

“You’re familiar with Hans Christian Andersen’s The Little Mermaid, yes?”

“The Little Mermaid…”

I didn’t need to ask “And what does that have to do with the penalty?”

I was born in a town with a deep familiarity with mermaids, and I could recognize her intent in an instant.

The Little Mermaid may have gotten a human form, but she wasn’t able to marry the prince. And in the end…?

She turned to foam and vanished.

“I wish you luck.”

The call cut off abruptly as always.

And at last, I understood the position I was in.

This was the moment I realized my priorities had changed.

I’ll be truthful. Upon learning that I had to confront the issue of Hajikano once more, the first thought I had was “Great - here I was trying to get closer with Nagahora and Chigusa, and then this happens.”

Yes, at this point, I began to see Hajikano, my initial objective, as a bother. To be blunt, I didn’t want to worry myself with Hajikano ever again. I was frankly fed up with it.

What about Hajikano did I like? Maybe anyone who was kind to me would have done the job. After all, wasn’t I slowly becoming captivated by Chigusa Ogiue, too? Was I not feeling that if I had time to smooth-talk Hajikano, I should devote it to hanging out with Nagahora and his friends?

…To make a self-justification, people pampering me for the first time in my life simply threw me off, and made me forget the importance of things. It was a mistaken thought, as foolish as cutting off your hand to take care of a pain in your fingertip. In fact, the reason I wanted to be a better person in the first place was to be someone who Hajikano would consider to be on her level. Yet at some point, the steps became the goal. I lost sight of the thing that was most important to me.

Though in a state of confusion, my feet carried me to Hajikano's house. It was true that I wanted to deepen my bond with Nagahora and the rest. But that wouldn't do me much good if I was dead. I had no choice. There was no other way to save myself except by earning Hajikano's love.

It was 8 PM. As I crossed the bridge, a two-car train came down the track. There was a brief silence once the train left, but just as my ears got used to it, the bugs came back little by little.

I didn't have any plan resembling a plan. It seemed impossible to me that *anyone*could budge Hajikano as she was now. She had completely shut herself away. Hiding in her shell, refusing all communication. Made to despair by life to the point of putting her head in a noose. What could someone like me say to someone like her?

Besides, it wasn't even *what* to say that was important - it was *who* said it. Because it was none other than Hajikano who had soothed me back in grade school, saying "I think your birthmark's wonderful, Fukamachi." Even if someone else had said the same thing, it would probably only sound like a cheap consolation. Hearing it from Hajikano, who had no need to curry favor or get in good with anyone, made those words feel genuine. There was at least one person in this world who didn't think poorly of my birthmark - she let me believe that.

Could I do the same thing? Me saying "I think your birthmark's wonderful, Hajikano," well, I doubted I could expect any decent results. And before that - did I really, earnestly think her birthmark was wonderful? It was an undeniable fact that seeing her face that night in the moonlight, I was chilled by the feeling that something precious had been tarnished. Most importantly, wasn't I overjoyed about the disappearance of my own birthmark? I was leading a fulfilling life for the first time now that it was gone… How could I speak well of Hajikano's?

I was blocked on every side. Going to Hajikano's house felt like going to accept a death sentence. Even if I could meet with her, surely all I'd get is a reaffirmation of how much she hated me. Mud thrown on my memories, disappointment, a reminder that the girl I adored had been lost to me forever.

My feet grew heavy, and my steps got shorter with each one. Yet as long as I kept walking, however long it might take, I would eventually reach my destination. Standing at Hajikano's front door, I rang the doorbell with a feeling of desperation. If her parents answered, what

kind of excuse would I make up? If they told me through a door chain, “Don’t come here again,” what would I do then? I didn’t have any strategies in mind for those. Just get this over with, I thought.

The one who appeared at the door was Hajikano’s sister, Aya.

“Oh, it’s you.” She remembered me, it seemed. “What’d you come for at this hour?”
“I’ve come again to talk with Yui.”
“Didn’t I say you shouldn’t bother with her anymore?”

“Miss Aya.” I spared no time turning to my trump card. “Are you aware that Yui has attempted suicide once?”

Aya’s expression didn’t change. But that, in fact, indicated her unease.

After taking a moment to recover, she spoke aggressively.

“Yeah, I know. But what about it?”

With hands behind her back, she closed the door, searched her right pocket, then searched the opposite pocket for a crumpled cigarette pack. She began to smoke; it gave off a sharp peppermint smell.

“To be honest, I don’t care if she doesn’t go to school, or tries to kill herself. If she doesn’t wanna go, sure, don’t go. If she wants to die, go ahead and die.”

“…Surely you don’t seriously think that way?”

“Oh, I think I’m thinking it pretty seriously. Yosuke Fukamachi, right? You have any experience having a sibling who’s way too good?”

“No,” I shook my head.

“When your sister’s like that, to be frank, it makes you wanna die. I’ve heard people talking behind my back, like "why is the older one so average when the younger one’s so pretty?”, a million times. “Sisters? Huh, you don’t look anything alike,” they smirk - that’s not a rare occurrence either. The relatives all fawned over her and paid me no attention. …But as time passed, I stopped caring about what other people thought. I’m able to just say “think what you want to think” now.“

With a distant gaze, Aya let out a puff of smoke.

"Except the problem of *me* always comparing my sister’s life to mine has stuck around to the

end. While I'm desperate to win over just one guy, she brings in ten. Lest I think a good-looking guy wanted to talk to *me*, the second sentence is just "Introduce me to your sister." I studied my butt off to get into a high school she treats as a backup. Whaddya think of that? Even if she has no ill will, doesn't it seem natural to wish she'd go poof?"

"…But, even then," I managed to interrupt. "You really wouldn't care if your own sister killed herself?"

"I wouldn't. No doubt I'd be relieved," she replied without hesitation. "So that's that. Sorry that you walked all this way - could you leave?"

After stomping out her cigarette, Aya wordlessly turned her back to my glare and reached for the door.

She turned back and asked, "First things first, what can you even do? You couldn't do anything last time. You just jumbled up her feelings more and left. If that didn't teach you to give up, you must have some secret plan this time, huh?"

Seeing that I wasn't answering, Aya snorted and shut the door in my face.

Leaning on a stone wall, I looked up at the July night sky. Even with streetlights right nearby, I could identify a few dozen stars. From a house across the street came murmurs from a television. I smelled boiling curry from somewhere else.

I twisted my body to look at the second-floor windows. The light in Hajikano's room was off. Already fell asleep, probably… Or maybe she was glaring at the sky from her dark room? That sounds more likely. I had no basis, but I thought so.

The energy left my body. I felt I wouldn't be able to stand back up for a while. As I closed my eyes and listened to the bugs, a comfortable fatigue embraced me.

While I nodded off, memories of a week ago surfaced behind my eyelids. The pitch dark room, the ray of light seeping through the door, Hajikano stroking my cheek, her face illuminated by the light through the curtains, her sitting on the floor and crying, the blood pouring from where she'd scratched me…

There I stopped the flashback and rewound a few seconds.

Something bothered me.

It was a small thing. Like a single instrument a little out-of-tune in a full orchestra, something you'd easily overlook unless you were a pretty sharp person.

I listened closely to seek it out.

Had it just been the birthmark that was different about her? Was there anything else odd? Just how much time had you spent in grade school sneaking looks at her face? Compare that memory burned into your brain and her present appearance - is there any change you can see that can't be explained by simply growing up?

The moment I was done playing spot-the-difference, I almost yelled.

There was a mole under her eye.

I'd read a lot of writings about dermatology. So I knew that moles appearing later in life certainly wasn't a rare occurrence. But with the mole being under her eye, I couldn't brush it off as a coincidence. After all, there was a time when a so-called "crying mole" held special significance for Hajikano and I.

I recalled a conversation I had with her four years ago.

"What an awful wound," Hajikano said, looking at my scraped knee. It was no exaggeration; it really was an awful wound. I'd gotten in a fight with some middle-schoolers who laughed at my birthmark, and they shoved me to the ground.

"It doesn't hurt?"
"Nah, it hurts."
"Then you should look more like you're hurting."
"Sure, if that made it heal up faster…"

Hajikano squatted and stared at my knee. She wasn't directly touching it, but I felt kind of ticklish and said "don't stare at it like that."

She stood up and looked into my eyes.

"Yosuke, even when bad things happen, it never shows on your face."
"Is that bad?"

"It's not good." She stood up tall to gently stroke my face. "If you make a habit of that, then when you're really having a hard time, you might not be able to ask for help."

"That's fine."
"No, it's bad." She shook her head and put her hands on my shoulders.

“Okay, how about this? When you’re really in trouble, Yosuke, but you don’t feel like you can ask for help, you can give me a signal instead.”
“A signal?”

Hajikano took a marker out of her pencil box, said “Stay still,” and made a black dot under my eye.

“What’s this?”, I asked.

“A crying mole.” Hajikano put the marker away. “When you want help, draw a mole under your eye. If I see that, you won’t even have to say anything, and I’ll help you.”

“I see. So it’s a distress signal,” I smiled awkwardly, rubbing under my eye.

At the time, I thought it was just a joke. The topic of crying moles never came up between us ever again, and I never used that signal. So I had completely forgotten it was even a thing.

Of course, it was possible that Hajikano’s mole wasn’t drawn on, but a real one that had sprung up there. Maybe I was just making a big mistake, and she didn’t remember that silly joke from four years ago.

But for now, that was fine. If it was a mistake, that was enough. Consciously or not, Hajikano was seeking help. And via a signal which only I would understand. A method that we devised back when we were closest. Right now, I had the freedom to convince myself of that.

My earlier despair was clearing away. I felt like I could keep trying for a little longer.

The next morning, I was shaken awake by Aya.

“Don’t tell me, you stayed out here all night?”, she asked in amazement.
“Seems that I did.”
“Are you an idiot?”
“Seems that I am.”

My joints were all screaming from sleeping out on the road, but I felt strangely pleasant otherwise. I stood up and stretched. Closing my eyes, I heard the morning wind rustling the trees and birds chirping. It was probably around 6 AM. The air had yet to fill with that heavy humidity; its slight warmth felt good on my skin.

“I was waiting for you. I felt that in order to approach Yui, it would be fastest to persuade you, Miss Aya.”

“Still haven’t given up?” She furrowed her brow.
“Correct. Yui needs me, you see.”

“Hmph. Well, isn’t that swell.” She grabbed my shoulder and brushed me aside. “See ya, I’m in a hurry here.”
“Have a good day. I’ll wait here for your return.”

Aya glared at me and looked like she wanted to say “Um, y'know…”, but seeing that I wouldn’t avert my gaze, she swallowed her words.

After a while, she signed with resignation.

“My sleepless nights are still going strong,” Aya said, pointing at the bags under her eyes. “Why’s that? Because every night at 2, there’s a rustling coming from the back door. Seems she’s sneaking out of the house every night to go somewhere.”

“At 2? 2 AM?”

“Yeah. Dunno where she goes, and I’m not interested in finding out. But you’ve got some understanding of her; maybe knowing where she’s headed might give you some kind of clue.”

With that, she went to leave, and I bowed my head.

“Thank you very much, Miss Yui.”

“You’re a real idiot. You could always just find another girl.” She put her hand on my head and ruffled my hair. “See ya, Yocchan.”

Once Aya left, her dark-rooted brown hair fluttering in the wind, I let out a big yawn. No, not even I could just wait around here until 2 AM. I decided I’d get back home and sleep soundly.

I began walking home. In the morning air, I found myself naturally stretching my back. Children ran past me with radio calisthenics stamp cards hanging from their necks. Water plants floated on the still water in a ditch. Announcements played on the town broadcast system, but it was too crackly to make out a single word. That was always the way. Even if it were the Earth’s final day, they’d announce the end of the world with the same old mutter that nobody could make out.

At home, mom was having breakfast alone. Dad had already gone to work. “Where did you go?”, mom asked, so I lied, “On a walk. I got up weirdly early.” She seemed to believe that. After getting a bare minimum of food in me, I took a shower, put on dry clothes, and slept for about five hours.

Waking up in the afternoon, I called Nagahora.

“I know we were going to the beach later today, but I’ve got other plans, sorry. Hope the five of you have fun.”

“Too bad, we were all looking forward to it.” He didn’t show any irritation about my sudden change of plans, but readily accepted it. “It’s fine if you come late, so let us know if you think you can come.”

“Sure. Sorry to let you know at the last minute.”

I put the receiver down, then faced my desk and began on my summer homework. Even if the end of our lives is within sight, unless that’s something particularly concrete, we can’t just abandon our daily duties. It’s absurd, really.

When the sun set, I went to the living room to get dinner, and sat across from my mother to eat yakisoba with such an overload of cabbage that it hardly had any taste. There was a baseball game on TV, but neither mom nor I favored either team. So unless the fielding team showed some particularly good play, we just cheered for the team at bat.

“When people have favorite teams, I wonder what makes them like that team?”, mom pondered while pouring liquor into her teacup. “It’s not because they know someone on the team, right?”

“Usually because they’re local, or they have a favorite player, or it’s the first team they ever watched, or because they’re just good, or maybe even because they’re bad. There can be a lot of reasons, I guess.”

“I see! How interesting.” My answer seemed to leave an impression on her. “It almost sounds like reasons for falling in love. Because her house is close by, she has elements you like, she was the first girl you ever saw, she’s dependable, or maybe you figure she can’t be left alone…”

“I don’t really get the "first girl you ever saw” one.“

"Oh? I think that one really fits,” she proudly insisted. “What I mean is, the moment you meet her, you *feel* like she’s the first girl you’ve ever seen in your life. It’s as if you’ve been struck by lightning, your blood’s running hot, your heart beats fast like it isn’t your own, your throat is dry… And that’s when you know love.”

I smiled wryly. “That’s not the kind of thing you say drinking beer from a teacup.”

“But don’t you think that’s more persuasive? Surely it’s at least more genuine from me than from a dreamy-eyed high school girl in a fancy café.”

Once dinner was over and I’d washed the dishes, I still had over five hours to spare. I went to my room and did some basic weight training, then set my alarm to go off at 12, turned off the light, and fell asleep on my futon.

And so the time came. To help with tailing, I wore a black shirt with muted denim jeans, and tightly tied the laces of my well-worn sneakers. To further disguise myself, I put on black-framed glasses. The lenses were covered with dust, and I had to blow on and wipe them repeatedly. I’d bought them in middle school hoping to cover my birthmark, but upon wearing them, I found I’d made a miscalculation. The blueish-black birthmark blended into the color of the glasses, making it just look like it spread even further across my face; once I realized that, they earned a permanent spot on my desk. Luckily, my vision hadn’t changed much since then, so the lenses still worked fine for me.

It took less than twelve minutes to walk to Hajikano’s house. The stone wall around her house had not only a front gate on the south side, but also a small entrance on the east, leading me to believe Hajikano went in and out of that after going out the back door. I dared to hide not outside the gate, but on the inside. There, I could stay out of the streetlights, and it seemed easy to conceal myself in the bushes.

Time passed slowly. It being such a humid night, even sitting still in the shadows made me sweat. Thus, I was bitten by many mosquitoes while waiting for Hajikano. There were at least ten bites on my legs alone. On top of that, several crickets were making a grating sound nearby. It was uncomfortable, but I couldn’t move; this was the only location where I could be in Hajikano’s blind spot as she came out the back door. I couldn’t know when she’d show up, so I certainly couldn’t smoke either. I should’ve applied bug spray, I lamented.

Just as Aya said, Hajikano appeared at 2 AM. She opened the door soundlessly, and came out looking like a sleepwalker. She wore a linen slip similar to before, a sweat miniskirt, and flat sandals that looked difficult to walk in. If you were headed somewhere far away on a summer night, you wouldn’t dress like this. Her destination must have been somewhere close.

Tailing Hajikano was simple. Unless they have reason to believe you’re being followed, people don’t check for someone behind them or abruptly start moving faster. Just keeping a fixed distance and keeping your footsteps quiet is enough; no need to even hide.

When I was at last able to hazard a guess at where she was headed, I couldn’t help but feel that it was all somehow fateful. After going down a path alongside rice paddies and through several tunnels, she went off the path and began to descend a slope. All there was that way was a forest.

A normal person might have lost their nerve at this point. But I had some familiarity with that route.

Past the trees was a road which had been abandoned ages upon ages ago. Following the path of soil and fallen leaves, there was a red bridge going across a river. But one would hesitate to call it a bridge. It was naturally rusted all over due to years of neglect, and over half of the wooden boards had rotted away. All that was left was a metal frame about 15 centimeters thick and guardrails, and even those were in such a state that I would expect them to break any time now.

Hajikano crossed the bridge without any trouble.

Beyond it was her destination. The Red-Room Ruins I had once told Nagahora and his friends about.

Technically, the building was called the Masukawa Hotel. Though now decrepit and covered with vines, the hotel had once been fairly prosperous, but it was closed when a guest smoking in bed started a fire that killed many people - so goes the rumor, which any student in the town of Minagisa has heard at least once. But that was just the made-up ramblings of bored students, and in truth, the proprietor had simply fled in the night when business started to decline. For a time, it had been treated as a hangout for delinquent students, so all the windows were broken, it was littered with trash, there was spraypainted graffiti all over. But as the building aged further, floorboards started to give out and ceilings crumbled, so not even delinquents would come near it anymore.

Hajikano went casually into those ruins with just a flashlight. No mistaking it, she'd become quite accustomed to walking around here. The building was even worse for wear than when I'd visited; the hallways were fine, but the rooms were filled with holes. She went straight for the stairs, up to the second floor, to the third. A chain hung in front of the stairs going up from there, with a plate reading "Staff Only"; she stepped over it and proceeded even further.

In stark contrast to the rooms, with furniture and peeling ceilings and beds and mats that seemed beyond repair, the rooftop retained its appearance from when the hotel was still a functional hotel. Unless she intended to jump off this roof, this had to be her final destination.

A chair was placed in the center of the roof. It was a familiar chair with armrests. Maybe someone had brought it up from the "red room." Hajikano sat in it, put her arms on the armrests, stretched her legs, and relaxed.

This was her special viewing seat.

It was a strange scene, but at the same time, somehow invited a sense of nostalgia. A girl dressed in night clothes, sitting in a single comfy chair in the middle of a dreary rooftop,

looking at the stars. It was all so unnatural, but bizarrely harmonious. That lack of coherence made it feel like a dream. Yes, this is probably what it would feel like to wander into someone else's dream.

If you ignored the various dangers, this *was* an ideal place to view the stars. No trees or power lines to obstruct your vision, no chance of light interference. When I followed her lead and looked up, my vision was filled with hundreds of stars. I hadn't even walked thirty minutes from the residential district - was the view really so different here? Or maybe walking in the dark had made my eyes able to see meager lights I wouldn't otherwise.

I observed Hajikano's actions from behind a pillar. She stayed in the chair and didn't move. Five paper-rolled cigarettes worth of time passed.

Then, I heard a song.

At first, it was terribly modest. The voice was quiet and weak. But it gradually became louder, and clearer. A song with a melody that was melancholic, but with a hint of warmth.

The Mermaid's Song. There wasn't a person in Minagisa who didn't know it.

I listened in to Hajikano's song. Her clear voice echoed alongside the rustling trees and insects, and it seeped into the warm summer air.

I'll keep this night a secret, I thought. Yes, I had a duty to at least let Aya know what her sister was going out every night and doing, but I didn't even want to relinquish that.

It's fine if I'm the only one who knows this beautiful secret.

About an hour exactly after coming to the rooftop, Hajikano slowly stood up. But I didn't tail her. I was convinced she would head straight home without any detours.

Once she left and I was alone, I sat in the comfy chair she had been in and looked up at the stars. I felt some of her warmth was still there.

The next night, and the night after, Hajikano left home at about the same time to go look at the stars. During the day, I went around inspecting the ruins to ensure she wouldn't get hurt; stomping on weak floors to open clearly-visible holes, sweeping away glass shards and sharp splinters on her usual route to the roof.

There were all sorts of things laying about in the rooms. Bottles with drinks still in them, broken tableware, torn curtains, stained futons, broken fans, TVs with holes in the screen, ropes with unknown use, piles of adult magazines, snapped umbrellas. I'd expect it to be a

breeding ground for bugs and rats, but oddly, I didn't see even a single spider. Maybe even bugs don't come near a truly dead place.

I had no reason to know it at the time, but the summer of 1994 was an extremely important summer for astronomers. On March 24th, 1993, three researchers at Palomar Observatory in San Diego, California - Eugene Shoemaker, his wife Carolyn Shoemaker, and David Levy - discovered an elongated comet in the Virgo constellation. The comet was named "Shoemaker-Levy 9" (SL9) after the three of them.

It was found that the comet had been caught in Jupiter's gravity in the 1960s, and in 1992, it split up into over twenty linked pieces. In 1994, from July 16th to 22nd, those pieces rained down on the south side of Jupiter. For a few months afterward, you could see the bruises they left on the surface of the planet even with a small telescope. It was a huge, historic event in the field of astronomy and got lots of coverage on TV and in the newspapers, but Hajikano and I having no interest in news, we didn't have any inkling of it.

The appearance of this comet ended up taking away one great joy from amateur astronomers. The impact of SL9 into Jupiter seemed to prove that a comet colliding with Earth, previously only considered as a mere possibility, was entirely plausible. This led experts in the field to become extra-observant of near-Earth objects, in turn making it extremely difficult for an amateur to be the first to discover a comet.

But suppose Hajikano did know something so historic was occurring among the stars she was looking at. I still doubt she would think anything of it. She'd showed no interest in astronomical knowledge, or observation, or photographs. She just liked to look up at the sky and absentmindedly gaze at stars she didn't know the names of.

On another night, she was looking at the stars. On the roof of the ruined hotel, listening to their voices. I watched over her from the shadows. I knew that alone wouldn't turn the situation in my favor, and felt the deadline of the bet coming ever closer, but I just couldn't bring myself to speak. I wouldn't dare intrude on her secret joy.

And so summer break proceeded, day by day.

Chapter 5: The Ninth Comet

“Seems clear she wasn’t getting on well with her classmates.”

The Aya I met that day was a totally different person from the Aya I’d met before. Before, she was always sleepy and bedheaded, so I saw all of her bad side. But in proper makeup and an ironed white shirt, she was no less charming than her sister. She probably knew full well that she was capable of presenting herself in a charming way, I supposed. No doubt, that excellent ability was fostered by the sense of inferiority her sister instilled in her.

“But I dunno anything beyond that,” Aya shrugged. “Yui suddenly took to skipping class in the summer, her third year of middle school. But she hasn’t offered me any explanation for it. Not to friends, or to teachers, or to family. When our parents ask what happened at school, it’s always "Nothing.” Maybe decently smart kids just have a habit of taking all their problems on themselves, and not being able to rely on others.“

"Yes, she never was the type who itched to tell others about her troubles.”

“Right. So sorry, Yocchan, but I don’t think you can be much help. I doubt our parents know any more than me, either.”

Aya had a much friendlier attitude than previous meetings. One reason was probably that she was sleep-deprived then, but maybe her personality also depended on whether she’d put on makeup or not. When you have confidence in yourself, you can afford to be nice to others.

I had a reason for coming to visit Aya again. While tailing Hajikano every night, I noticed many little actions and behaviors which overlapped with the Hajikano of the past. While she seemed so different on the surface, I could see how fundamental aspects of her hadn’t changed so much since back then. And as my conviction of that grew, a doubt also grew in my mind.

Was Hajikano’s despair something caused by the birthmark alone?

No matter what, I couldn’t see her as a person who would go as far as suicide over a single blemish. Because this was the same Hajikano who had been the only one to accept my birthmark back in elementary school. Can someone’s nature change that much in a year and a half? Or maybe it was as simple as being able to accept it on someone else’s face, but not on her own?

Perhaps her despair had some deeper reason behind it. We might have been so fixated on the visible as to overlook what was really important. Maybe, in that half-year gap between the birthmark appearing and her starting to skip school, some significant event happened to her?

If my theory, that her despair was rooted in something other than the birthmark, were correct, the first step to knowing the truth would be getting closer to Hajikano's heart. So I first came to talk to Aya, the person closest to her.

"If you really want to know, you'll probably just have to ask her classmates directly," Aya suddenly spoke after a long silence. "There's probably at least one girl at your school who came from Mitsuba Middle School, right? Maybe she'd know why Yui got like that."

"I was considering that, too. But it's summer break, so everyone is all scattered."
"Then patrol someplace where you'd expect there to be people."

"I suppose… Just as you say, Miss Aya. I'll go around places where people gather. And I'll visit the school too, just to be sure. Maybe I can ask students doing club activities."

"I'd love to help and all, but…" She folded her arms and bit her lip. "I've got plans to meet some friends from high school today…"

Aya stopped there and looked over my shoulder. I looked back and saw a blue car stopped in the street with a surfboard on the roof carrier and the hazard lights on. The car was a horribly old make, the hood was mostly sunburnt white, and the engine made a strange rattling noise.

The driver's door opened, and out came a man about the same age as Aya. He was only a little taller than me, but he was lightly tanned and muscular, emphasized by his tight shirt. Wearing a cheap necklace and sunglasses like the compound eyes of an insect, he walked over to Aya, sandals clopping against the ground. "Hey," he waved. Then, acting as if he only just noticed, he looked toward me and asked, "Who's this guy?"

"Friend of my sister's," Aya answered. "So what are you here for?"

"Didn't I say I'd come pick you up, Aya?" The man took off his sunglasses and made a shocked face. "Promised to come by at 1 today."

"And didn't I later say I'd gotten other plans?"
"Nope."

"Is that right? Well, I do in fact have plans to meet some friends from high school today. I can't spare the time for you."

While the man stood there at a loss, his mouth half-open, Aya said "Oh yes," as if she'd

thought of a brilliant plan.

“See, this guy needs to go around town to get information. Masafumi, you help him out. You’ve got all day, don’t you?”

“Me?”, Masafumi balked, his voice cracking.

“If you don’t want to, that’s fine.”

His shoulders drooped. “Okay, I’ll do it,” he weakly replied.

The man’s name was Masafumi Totsuka. A 23-year-old college graduate who was in the same class with Aya. He seemed to have a thing for her, but she denied his every approach. He’d only just taken up surfing and still had trouble getting on the waves.

“Hey, how do ya think I could get Aya to get friendly?”, Masafumi asked, my circumstances clearly the furthest thing from his mind right now. “You’re in good with her, right?”

“No. We’ve only just met.”
“But she seemed real fond of you. Ain’t she?”
“You just happened to see it that way. When we first met, she thought I was her sister’s stalker.”
“But you’re something like that, right?”
“I won’t deny it.”

“Then we’ve got something in common,” Masafumi remarked with deep feeling. “Both getting tossed around by a Hajikano.”

The car radio was tuned to a local station, playing pop songs. Afterward, there was a very brief news report. It said this summer would be the biggest scorcher in twenty years. Apparently, by July 13th, the rainy season had come to a close all across the country. In contrast to that report, the AC in the car was keeping us awfully cold, and I kept rubbing my arms to warm up. When I got out at my first destination, the high school, my body which had forgotten it was summer was assaulted by the heat, and within minutes, I was sweating like mad.

I went around the school, and whenever I found students who looked like first-years, I haphazardly asked them about it. The school was surprisingly full of students even on summer break, and their activities were highly varied. Tennis players in a sweaty room, getting really into board games. Baseball players in the courtyard, dealing with the swarms of bugs. Couples in the library paying no mind to those around them, touching and getting looks. Art students who spent so long sketching outdoors, they were more tanned than the sports players.

Girls in an empty classroom with the curtains shut, talking amongst each other. A guy in the music club who passed out from a lack of oxygen being put on a stretcher. I asked about twenty students in total, but not one of them was from Mitsuba Middle School.

“That fancy girls’ school, right?”, a boy said. “Nobody would ever willingly come from a place like that to here. You’re looking in the wrong place.”

It was just as he said. I left the school and returned to the car. Masafumi was reclining in his seat and reading a film magazine. When I told him I’d had no results, he snorted indifferently, tossed the magazine to the back seat, and started the engine.

Masafumi said he was hungry and stopped in front of a ramen place. I didn’t feel especially hungry, but I reluctantly went with him. Many flies flew about the shop, and the ramen they served tasted like instant noodles, just with more oil. Masafumi ordered ramen for two and cleaned it up in no time.

After eating, he requested that I explain the situation to him again. I abridged the details, telling him I was looking into the reason why my former good friend Hajikano had stopped attending class.

“Why’re you going around investigating what you could ask her yourself?”, he puzzled. “Is there a point in being all roundabout?”

“It’s an iffy issue,” I answered. “Some roads might look like the fastest and most straightforward on the map, but they turn out to be the most roundabout.”

“I dunno what the problem is, but I’d just ask her directly.”

“I’d agree,” interjected the shop owner over the counter. “Girls love to talk, right? If they see you wanna listen, they’ll tell you more than you even asked.”

“I wonder about that,” the owner’s wife refuted. “I’d say everyone has a thing or two they can’t let anyone know, wouldn’t you?”

“Not me,” the owner mumbled.

“Oh, really?”, she asked doubtfully. “I’d thought you had plenty.”

After leaving the shop, we visited places like the desolate shopping district and the plaza by the shore one after another. After questioning some students stuffing their cheeks with cup ramen in the parking lot on the roof of the supermarket, my vitality finally ran out. Let’s call it a day, I thought.

Ultimately, I'd gotten no useful information at all. I'd anticipated this, but much less than a student from Mitsuba Middle School, I didn't even find anyone who*knew* one. How many students from that prestigious school could there possibly be in Minagisa, anyway? After all, I didn't know a single person from there except Hajikano.

"Guess that was a waste of time," Masafumi said from the driver's seat.
"I'm sorry. Thanks for helping today."
"Sure. You better let Aya know I was helpful, yeah?"

Just as I thought we were going back the way we'd come, the car slowed down in the bar district. I looked at Masafumi suspiciously.

"Let's take a detour. You've walked around all day, a little stop won't hurt." And with that, he brought me into a bar.

Poking at mackerel while Masafumi drank sake next to me, I slurped soba noodles with entirely-too-thick broth. It was my first time in a bar, and I worried about my high school self being there, but they seemed to have no qualms as long as I didn't drink any alcohol. But also, how did Masafumi intend to get home after this? Would he leave the car here, or spend the night in the car, or sure enough, try to drive drunk? Whatever his intention, as his passenger, it was naturally on my mind.

After some time, Masafumi left me and walked around the restaurant to chat with some people who looked like regular customers. I half-watched the TV in the corner of the bar. It was some special on ghosts. Hearing voices at night in the abandoned school building, the kind of story you hear everywhere.

I put my elbow on the counter and started to nod off when Masafumi came back to me with somebody. He was an intellectual-looking man with glasses holding a highball glass in his hand.

"Hey, you, you better thank me," said Masafumi, clearly drunk and red down to the neck. "This guy's little sister's from Mitsuba Middle School."

"Hello," said the bespectacled man with a smirk. "Was there something you wanted to ask a graduate of Mitsuba?"

"Yes, that's right," I replied. "But specifically, I'm looking for anyone who graduated Mitsuba last year…"

The man's lips raised into a grin.

"That's my sister exactly."

I parted with Masafumi there. He collapsed in the driver's seat, said "I'm just gonna rest here," and waved at me haphazardly. I went walking for about 20 minutes with the man in glasses, Yadomura, and arrived at his house. He went to call for his sister, then came back a few minutes later alone.

"It seems she hasn't come home yet," he told me apologetically. "I'll bet she's gone to the woods."

"Woods?", I repeated. "You mean the ones by the coast?"

"Right. I think she's there looking for ghosts."

Ghosts?

I definitely hadn't misheard that; Yadomura said "ghosts." But touching on the subject of ghosts no further, he gave me very simple instructions on how to get to where he believed his sister was. I resolutely asked, "Um, what's that about ghosts?", and Yadomura answered with an ambiguous smile, "If you're curious, you can ask her yourself."

After walking down the path between the rice fields, I found the entrance to the woods. The woods at night were something you never got used to with any number of visits. Especially if it was summer. Naturally, without any artificial light sources, only a tiny bit of moonlight came through the thick branches and leaves, and unending mysterious noises from all directions made you uneasy. It was honestly hard to believe that a student from a prestigious girls' school had gone in here.

Following the path, I found an open area that served as a crossroads. According to Yadomura, his sister should have been there. As my eyes adjusted to the light, I saw a small girl sitting on a bench formed from a stump. She wasn't moving a muscle, so momentarily I thought she was part of the stump.

"Good evening," I said to her, unable to see her face. "Your brother told me about this place. I've been looking for a student from Mitsuba to ask them something."

After some time, a reply came from the darkness. "Then your journey is over. Good job."

"Do you know a girl named Yui Hajikano?"

"Yui Hajikano…", she repeated, as if to get a handle on the sound of it. "Yes, I know her. The girl with the birthmark on her face?"

“Right, there’s a big birthmark on the left side,” I confirmed, resisting the urge to jump with joy. “I’d like to ask some things about her -”

She interrupted me. “That’s all I know. We didn’t particularly mingle, and we were in different classes, so I know nothing about Miss Hajikano. From seeing her in photos and my yearbook, I remembered her name for her distinctive birthmark, but I’ve never once spoken with her.”

“…I see.”

I tried to hide the disappointment in my voice as much as I could, but Yadomura’s sister picked up on it easily.

“I’m sorry. I would love to introduce you to an acquaintance, but I’m poor at socializing, so I don’t have any such person to send you to.”

“No, it’s fine,” I said as cheerfully as I could muster. “Actually, I’m more interested in hearing about this ghost thing.”

After a pause, she spoke bitterly. “Did my brother mention that?”

“Yeah. You’re searching for ghosts here, aren’t you?”

“…I don’t honestly believe in them, necessarily,” she said as if pouting. “And it doesn’t have to be ghosts, either. A UFO, some ESP, a cryptid, anything would do. Essentially, I’m waiting to find a fissure in the world.”

I pondered her words. I reasoned that those could be reworded as “things which go beyond human understanding.”

“Say, mister,” she said to me - I wonder if she misunderstood me to be her elder. “I do understand, you know, that the things people call ghosts are just illusions their brain shows them. But even if it’s an illusion or a hallucination, I don’t even care. If I can witness just one thing that exists outside the laws of reality, I think it would serve to give just a little bit of meaning to my life.”

Then she went silent as if to think for a moment. My eyes finally adjusting to the light, I could see her now. She was a doll-like girl, whose long hair going down to her waist gave an impression of being somewhat heavy.

“…In other words. If even just once, you saw the toys in the toybox get up at night and start talking, wouldn’t that change the meaning of every toy you ever saw afterward? That’s the kind of revolution I’m awaiting.”

She went on explaining her reason for looking for ghosts using various such examples for nearly twenty minutes. And once she reached what seemed like her conclusion, she suddenly fell silent like running out of battery, and muttered something.

“I’ve talked too much.”

She sounded like she wanted to fade away. If it weren’t so dark, I’m sure I would’ve clearly seen her blushing.

“It was very interesting,” I told her, not actually being sarcastic at all.

Her voice grew even weaker. “I usually have no one to talk to, so when I have the chance, I talk too much. When I get home, I’ll have a serious reflection session.”

“I know how you feel.”
“Lies. Surely you couldn’t understand. You seem like you have many friends.”

I smiled bitterly, mentally muttering to myself “definitely not.” In elementary school, I had made that kind of mistake again and again with Hajikano. After spending long breaks on my own and then going back to school, once I was able to talk to Hajikano there, I would keep talking about things she never asked about, and always felt depressed afterward. What an embarrassing loser I am, I chided, and every time I vowed to be a more quiet person.

“Hey, mister,” the girl asked as I left. “Do you think I’ll meet a ghost?”

“You’ll be fine,” I turned back and answered. “The world is overflowing with more intriguing phenomena than you think. I can guarantee that. In the process of looking for ghosts, you might encounter something even more bizarre.”

“…Thank you. If you say so, I’ll keep at it a little longer.”

She smiled, or so I think.

“It’s getting late, so be careful,” I told her, and left the woods.

As I walked the road back, I saw a number of green lights shimmering near an agricultural irrigation channel. If there was any blinking light smoother than a firefly’s, I didn’t know it. No ornamental light could turn on and turn off so naturally.

I stood there and gazed at the dreamlike spectacle of faint green, never tiring of it.

I'd failed to mention it to Yadomura's sister, but to tell the truth, I also had experience passing by the coast in search of something, though it wasn't ghosts.

It began with a strange occurrence at the beach.

It was in the summer, and I was seven. I'd come with a friend to the beach and was walking along the waves barefoot as usual. At the time, I liked stepping on the flattened sand after the waves retreated, so I spent as long as I could doing it as long as nobody stopped me.

My friend, meanwhile, got tired of this simple game quickly and began to seek new excitement. He rolled his pants up to his knees and began walking toward the open sea. Not thinking deeply about it, I followed behind him.

"Want to see how far you can go?", he said. "Even if we get wet, we'll dry off before we get home in this weather."
"Sounds fun," I agreed.

We threw the sandals in our hands onto the shore, and took careful steps into the ocean.

The weather was mind-numbingly clear. The sand was all dried up, the ocean gleamed white, and far in the horizon were clouds shaped just like the wave in The Great Wave Off Kanagawa.

Once the water got up to my chest, my feet became unsteady. Even if I could get my soles flat on the ground, every push and pull of the waves seemed like it might pry them away. We should have turned back right there, but not yet having learned to fear the sea, we optimistically thought that if things got really bad, we could retrace our steps.

The moment came suddenly. The seafloor took a steep downturn, and my legs were swept up. By the time I realized the danger, it was too late; my body was being dragged into the open sea. I tried to hold on with my tiptoes and return toward shore, but my body was only carried in the opposite direction of what I wanted.

By the time the water rose to my mouth, my mind was blank with fear. I tried to swim back, but whenever I stopped to catch my breath, I took in water, and became increasingly panicked. I was aware that when you were going to drown at sea, you should float face-up and wait for help, but that knowledge went off who knows where when I was *actually* drowning. Unable to find my way whatsoever, I struggled in the water, only worsening the situation.

It came up to the point of thinking that I didn't have enough breath left to survive. When all of a sudden, *a hand grabbed my wrist*. And it pulled me with incredible force.

Of course, I'm sure I was only imagining it in my fear, and had really only been caught in some seaweed or something. But personally, I couldn't make a calm judgement like that at the time. Certain that someone was trying to drag me out toward the open sea, I shuddered. But I didn't even have the strength left to pry away that hand.

For the first time in my life, I was cognizant of death. Strangely, as soon as I started to become aware of it, my feelings of fear and regret weakened. Only a deep resignation remained. I felt I now had a true understanding of the word "unrecoverable."

I wanted to know who was grabbing my wrist, and tried to grab theirs in return. But there was nothing there. Without me realizing it, the hand grabbing my wrist had gone.

Just then, my fingers touched ground.

I slowly stood up, and found myself in the shallows where the water didn't even reach my waist. I could hear seagulls. My friend was calling my name in the distance. My fear earlier seemed like it had never been; there was only a tranquil summer day. I stood there a while, staring at the wrist which something had been holding earlier. A delayed fear welled up in me. My pulse throbbed, my body shook. I rushed up to the shore, fell on the dry sand, and waited for the chills to recede.

The next day, I came to this conclusion about the miraculous event that happened at the beach.

On that day, *I was saved by a mermaid*.

Ever since then, I came to watch the sea every day. I probably thought that if I did, I would someday meet the mermaid who had saved me. Or else, maybe I couldn't forget the intense thrill of having such a close brush with death and coming back alive. I'd completely forgotten what seven-year-old me was thinking about.

Day after day I went to the beach, but naturally, no mermaid ever showed up. Gradually, my initial objective dwindled in importance, I forgot about the mermaid, and I was left with only the habit of going to the beach. Yes, I'd completely forgotten - but the reason I went to the beach whenever I could spare the time had its origin in a search for a mermaid.

*

The next day, I met Chigusa in the plaza outside the station. I'd promised to accompany her for her rehearsal for the Minagisa summer festival. When Chigusa appeared at the meeting place, despite it being the middle of summer break, she was diligently obeying the school's stupid rule of wearing your uniform when you go outside during the break.

Minagisa was limited in terms of shops and facilities where you could sit and relax, and more

than half of them were packed with students on vacation, so we reluctantly set up camp in the supermarket. In one corner, some high school boys were arm wrestling each other with juice on the line, and in the other, two high school girls were eating ice cream and complaining about their spineless boyfriends.

While I listened closely to Chigusa's melodic voice, I pondered what would be an appropriate place to get information next. A place where there were lots of graduates of Mitsuba Middle School. The first and most obvious candidate was Mitsuba High School. Mitsuba was basically a middle school and high school in one, and the vast majority of graduates went on to Mitsuba High. If I went there, I was sure to meet someone who knew Hajikano.

If you're wondering why I didn't ask there in the first place, you'd be right to wonder, but it was just so far away. The reason Hajikano went to Mitsuba Middle School was because she'd moved to the house of her grandmother on her mother's side. It was over an hour away from Minagisa by train. As such, I would've wanted to settle things here if I could, but it wasn't looking likely. Seems like I'll be going tomorrow morning to ask around Mitsuba High, I thought.

The problem was, it might seem a tad suspicious if I were to go down to that high-class girls' school by myself. Since so many people came to see the Mitsuba girl "brand," Mitsuba High was particularly harsh on outsiders, with guards always watching the front gate. A boy from another school would be the number one target to watch out for.

"…Ever since then, the girl broke all contact with both human and mermaid, quietly staying on the seafloor, occasionally recalling the past and weeping." Chigusa looked up from the script. "…The end. Fukamachi, were you listening?"

"Yeah, of course," I insisted, and applauded her to cover up my inattention. "I got really sucked into it. I'm amazed. You could just go up on stage right now without a problem."

"Thank you very much," Chigusa laughed, shaking her shoulders. "But compliment me more, please."

"It's not flattery when I say you have a prettier voice than anyone in the radio club."

"I suppose I feel rather elated."

"That's good." I smiled wryly. "By the way, don't you need to practice the song too?"

"I am practicing. And though I am, I will not let people hear it yet. And I have no intention of letting them hear until the performance."
"Why?"

Chigusa lowered her head. “Because it’s embarrassing,” she quietly murmured.

After reading through the script three times, we decided to take a break. I bought juice from a vending machine, and on returning to the table, four men with bright hair and gaudy outfits were laughing next to us.

“Let’s switch locations,” I said, and Chigusa nodded.

I snuck a glance at her face. The look she was giving the men was terrifyingly cold.

I felt uneasy wondering what she would think if she knew I used to be one of those people. Surely she would give the same cold glance to me, wouldn’t she?

We finished up practice and took a stroll down a path by a river. I casually looked over to the other shore of the sparkling river. There, I saw children walking on a hill made silhouettes by the backlight of the sunset, and wires connecting steel pylons painted a distorted musical score in the sky.

Suddenly, a plan came to mind.

I came to a stop and ceremoniously said, “Hey, Ogiue.”

“Yes?” Chigusa turned around forcefully, showing me a broad smile. “What is it?”

“Is it okay if I ask you something sort of weird?”

“Ask me something?” Chigusa awkwardly averted her eyes from me, staring at the ends of the hair draped over her chest. “Yes, of course.”

“To tell the truth, I have an earnest request of you.”
“Huh…?” Chigusa’s back straightened and her face stiffened. “A request?”
“Only if you have the time, I mean.”
“I do,” she replied before asking anything about the time.

“Thanks. See, tomorrow, I’m planning to go to Mitsuba High. I want you to come with me.”

“Mitsuba High?” Chigusa looked to find this totally unexpected. “Err, of course, I can accompany you… but what kind of business do you have there?”

I summarized the situation for her. My classmate Yui Hajikano being my friend in grade school. How she seemed to be mentally taxed right now (of course, I didn’t mention the suicide attempt). The cause of that not being certain. And how a middle school classmate of

Hajikano's might possibly know something about it.

"I understand," Chigusa nodded. "Not a deplorable objective, then."

"I went looking around Minagisa yesterday, but only found a single graduate from Mitsuba Middle School. Probably no choice but to go to Mitsuba High then, right?"

"However, you're wrong about that," Chigusa said with a serious look.
"What do you mean?", I asked.

"I mean that there's no need for you to go all the way out to Mitsuba High, Fukamachi," she answered. "For you see, the girl standing before you now was indeed a graduate of Mitsuba Middle School. What's more, she was in the same class as Hajikano in her third year."

Now that she was telling me this, I realized it wasn't that strange. In fact, I should have tried asking her first thing. If there was anyone I knew at Minagisa High that struck me as being Mitsuba-esque, it would be none other than Chigusa Ogiue.

"Well, Ogiue, do you know why Hajikano ended up -"
"I may know that," she interrupted, speaking like it wasn't of interest. "However, whether I will tell you is a different story."

Ignoring my response, Chigusa firmly made her position clear.

"After all, Hajikano wouldn't even say it in front of her own parents, would she? I simply can't go blabbering about a secret she wanted to conceal to that extent."

"You're absolutely right, Ogiue," I said after a few beats. "But given that, this is what I'm thinking. Maybe that secret in itself is a heavy burden for Hajikano. What if the pain of having to bear it herself and tell no one is the very thing putting pressure on her? Because in that case, I have to know."

"…This may be a slightly rude way of asking it, but." The tone of Chigusa's voice dropped.
"Why do you feel you must go that far for her, Fukamachi?"

"She helped me, a long time ago. I want to repay the favor."

Chigusa hung her head and thought for a while.

"Understood," she raised her head to say. "However, you absolutely must not tell anyone else. If possible, act like you don't know even in front of her."
"I understand. Thanks."

“And also…” Chigusa’s tenseness eased up into a grin. “In exchange, I will ask a request of you, too.”
“A request?”

“I haven’t decided what it is yet. I will think about it,” she said with a good mood.

Tall sunflowers planted in a field cast thick shadows on the road from the western sun. The blackened heads of the sunflowers all facing west looked like countless giant eyeballs.

Sunflowers chase after the sun in the process of growth. By the time the flowers open, they stop moving; by the time they produce seeds, they bend down as if bowing. After running around without principle seeking light, in the end they just stare at their feet and wilt. Feels like an allegory - so I think every time I see sunflowers.

Chigusa began to speak slowly, choosing her words. “I may have spoken somewhat arrogantly, but in truth, the information I have is rather meager. All our classmates would say the same if you asked them. I believe they all know only as much as I do.”

I nodded and urged her to go on.

“You may be aware already, but that birthmark of Hajikano’s appeared suddenly in the winter of her second year of middle school. At first, it was as small as a speck. However, it grew by the day, enlarging to its current size in less than a month. Hajikano herself acted as if the birthmark did not bother her, but the change had an impact on the people around her in many ways. For those who felt pity for Hajikano, there were also those who laughed and said it served her right, and some simply lamented the loss of one of her beauties. But on the whole, I believe people were mostly sympathetic.”

Here, Chigusa took a break.

“Fukamachi, perhaps you’re wondering if the appearance of that birthmark resulted in bullying at an all-girls school?”
“…Did it not?”

She shook her head. “At least until July of next year, Hajikano got on more or less the same as she did beforehand. Until then, Hajikano had such a perfect appearance - though this was no fault of her own - that she had a certain unapproachable nature. But perhaps mitigated by the birthmark, she was liked more by her classmates than before. To my knowledge, Hajikano was never bullied.”

From the way Chigusa was speaking, I could tell her effort to not sound authoritarian. It was like she was trying to tell me objective facts about Hajikano from as much of an “official

standpoint" as possible. She probably felt a bit guilty talking about her when she wasn't around.

"Now then," she said to introduce the main topic. I braced myself for what awfulness might be coming.

"I do not remember the exact dates, but it was definitely just before summer break, so I believe it was probably the middle of July of last year. Hajikano did not come to school for four days straight. When she did attend school again, I realized that this Hajikano was not the Hajikano from before."

"*Thus ends the story,*" said Chigusa.

"No one knows what happened in the span of those four days. In any event, what did happen in that short period changed everything about her. She didn't speak with her friends, she didn't make eye contact, and once summer break ended and the new term began, she had a habit of not coming to class. Soon various rumors and theories began to circulate, but ultimately, no conclusive facts that sound conclusive came to light."

After finishing, Chigusa gave a little sigh and sent a sympathetic glance at me, no doubt looking at a loss.

"My apologies, it seems I only confused you further. …However, I believe that if you did go to Mitsuba High and asked around, this is still all you would come up with."

"No, this is plenty. Thanks."

I looked up to the sky. Not only had I not found a lead toward resolution, the mysteries had only deepened.

For a long while afterward, we walked together in silence. I had my things to think about, and Chigusa seemed like she had Chigusa things to think about. When my thoughts finally found a place to land, Chigusa opened her mouth.

"My house is around here, so…"

Before I knew it, the smell of the tide was on the air. We'd come pretty close to the sea.

"This is far enough. Thank you very much for today." Chigusa bowed her head deeply.

"Come to think of it, we sure walked a long way," I said, reflecting on the way we came.
"Aren't you tired, Ogiue?"
"I am fine. I like to walk, you see."

“I do, too. Thanks for today. I’ll see you later.”
“Yes, sometime soon.”

Chigusa turned her back to me and walked away. But then, she soon stopped, turned, and called “Fukamachi.”

“Today, you did a very cruel thing to me. Did you realize?”
“A cruel thing?”, I repeated.

Chigusa grinned wide. “It was a joke. Goodbye.”

At the time, I didn’t think very deeply about what “cruel thing” I’d done to her. I decided it was a meaningless joke and forgot about it right away.

If I were in a position to be more calm and objective, I probably could have easily figured out the meaning of it. But my head was filled with Hajikano, so I couldn’t even afford to consider the possibility of someone showing me good will. Cruelty is less often something done consciously, and much more often done by unmindful people.

*

I visited Masukawa Hotel again that night. For the past few days, I’d been taking an approach of not tailing Hajikano from her house, but lying in wait at the ruins. Even if there was a light rain, or it was windless and sweltering, her feet never carried her anywhere besides those ruins. Knowing that, there was no need to risk tailing her.

I’d long since achieved my original objective of learning why she left the house night after night, to deepen my understanding of her. In essence, she liked watching the stars at the ruined hotel. It was futile to try and extract any more information out of her actions. And yet I’d continued tailing her, night after night.

My first priority now should have been to learn what events took place in the “blank four days” Chigusa told me about. And indirect means such as asking around and tailing were insufficient. For it remained an incomprehensible mystery even to Chigusa, who was as close to Hajikano as anyone at the time.

I couldn’t think of any option but to ask her directly… Though conscious of that fact, most likely I was unable to take that plunge because I wanted to watch Hajikano look at the stars from the shadows forever.

The next morning… I’d like to say, but in actuality, it was past noon. Because of my visits to

the ruins, I'd picked up a nocturnal schedule of waking up at noon and sleeping in the early morning.

I was woken up by the phone. The ringing sound in the silent house had a hollow feeling like the bell ringing at an elementary school on a day off. Leisurely making my way downstairs, not caring if I made it in time, I answered the call.

It wasn't the voice of the woman I heard.

"Hey, is this Fukamachi?"

It was my teacher, Kasai. To put it nicely, it wasn't a comforting voice to hear just as I was waking up. I regretted not just ignoring it and continuing to sleep snugly.

"Sorry to ask suddenly, but can you come to school right now?"

Kasai's attitude was different from usual today. There was a sense of distance, like he'd taken a step back. Maybe it wasn't Kasai who had business with me, but someone else.

"Understood," I replied drowsily. I wanted to ask why I was being called in, but Kasai's tone gave me the impression that he wouldn't take any questions from me. "I'll head there as soon as I'm ready."
"Right. Bye then."

The call ended. I took a shower, put on my uniform, had a breakfast of salmon slices and wakame miso soup while listening to the radio, and left the house with minimum luggage. The forecast seemed to call for another midsummer day, and piercing sunlight burned my skin.

The faculty room at Minagisa High seemed to be conserving energy even in this heat, so the non-air-conditioned room was just as hot as outside. The staff faced their desks with emaciated looks, and the plants by the windowsill were the only lively things in sight.

Kasai was waiting for me outside the room. Sure enough, he took me to see another faculty member. The one who called for me was Endou, the guidance counselor. He had a striking appearance - a giant body tanned black and a shaven head - that earned him many nicknames among the students, but nobody would say them in front of the man himself. Not only would Endou get irritated by the most minor of things, he was dreadfully threatening; once every few days, he would berate students who came late and make them get on their knees to apologize, or shout at girls whose skirts were a little too short and make them cry. You probably need one such person at a school, I feel, but he was someone you'd definitely want to avoid if you could help it.

Kasai went back to his desk, and Endou looked at me like looking at an inanimate object.

Though the conversation took its time starting, asking any questions was strictly off-limits. Teachers like this hated students speaking up independently more thran anything.

“Yosuke Fukamachi,” Endou mechanically read, glancing at the papers on his desk. Then he turned his chair around, re-faced me, and spoke threateningly.

“What were you doing out late last night?”

This wasn’t my first time being questioned by an oppressive teacher. I was called to the faculty room dozens of times in middle school, so Endou’s attitude could feel nostalgic to me, even. I could tell he was preparing to shout at me. Maybe he even had definite proof ready for it.

Endou must have called me in to condemn me breaking into the ruins, I supposed. Was it getting around that a high school student was sneaking in there every night?

“I was taking a walk outside,” I first replied. Lying wasn’t a good plan, but it wasn’t wise to reveal myself before knowing how much information he had.

“You’re aware that by law, young boys aren’t allowed to go out past 11 without supervision, aren’t you?”
“I am.”
“Then why did you think to take a walk?”

I wanted to say “could there any answer to that besides "I wanted to take a walk”?“, but I swallowed it in my throat. I had no choice but to hang my head and stay silent.

Endou broke the silence earlier than expected. "But let’s put that issue aside for now. Here’s the real question. Do you know of the ruined hotel at the foot of the mountain?”

“Do you mean Masukawa Hotel?”
“Right. Last night, there was a fire there.”

A cold sensation ran down my spine for an instant. Yet thinking back on everything I’d witnessed last night, from Hajikano visiting the ruins to me leaving, I sighed with relief. Most likely, whatever Endou was talking about happened after we left the ruins.

“By fire, I don’t mean a very big one,” he continued. “But it was one step away from escalating into a mountain fire.”

“So in short,” I interjected, wanting to move this along. “You’re suspecting that I might be the culprit?”

Endou glared at me with annoyance. “There was a report this morning. At the time of the fire, a student saw a young man walking from the window of their house. By chance, they also knew that person to be Yosuke Fukamachi. And that’s why you’ve been called here. …So I’ll ask you again. What were you doing last night?”

I hesitated to reply. First off, I wanted to avoid bringing up Hajikano at all costs. Any suspicious slip-ups, I would take responsibility for; I didn’t want to get Hajikano involved in it too. But if I said “I went to the ruins to see the stars,” would Endou believe me? No doubt about it, it would only deepen his suspicion.

Endou tapped the desk with his fist to hurry me up as I wondered if I had any decent escape routes. “What’s wrong? Why can’t you explain yourself? Something you can’t tell me?”

At times like this, you had to restrict yourself to one lie. From experience, telling two or more lies just made it that much easier to dig a hole for yourself. And if I could use only one lie, I would want to use it to hide the fact that Hajikano was on the scene.

Just as I started to say “Yes, last night, I…”, someone interrupted from out of the blue.

“He went with me to see the stars.”

Endou and I looked toward the source of the voice simultaneously.

The first thing to leap out to me was a dark blue birthmark covering half her face. Come to think of it, it was my first time seeing her birthmark in clear daylight.

“I believe the arson occurred after we left,” Hajikano said calmly. “You should be able to know if you look a little further into the witness report and the time of the fire.”

The question of why Hajikano was here was answered by a B4-size manila envelope under her arm. She was probably called here by Kasai to pick up assignments and handouts from the days she was absent.

Hajikano in uniform was probably a familiar sight for Kasai, but totally new to my eyes. It should have been just a common, unremarkable sailor outfit, but when she wore it, it escalated her to something otherworldly. Like the way a skilled player can totally change the meaning of an instrument.

Endou glared at the location of her birthmark, then all around her body, then brought his attention back to the birthmark. I snuck a glance at the side of her face without the birthmark. That crying mole was still there. It was too small to determine if it was a real mole or not.

“Your name?” As if asserting that he was in charge here, Endou picked up a pen and opened a wrinkled notebook. “First-year, I see. Class?”
“Yui Hajikano. Class 1-3, the same as him.”

Endou paused and pondered with the pen for a while, but not seeming to know the kanji for “Hajikano,” settled for writing it in katakana.

“Another law-breaker, then,” he snorted and closed the notebook. “So what were you there for?”

“I went to see the stars,” Hajikano answered without timidity. “There’s little light interference there, so it’s ideal for viewing them.”

“You like stars?”
“More than other things.”
“Was there any interesting movement last night?”, he asked as if testing her.

She thought briefly. “From about 1 to 2 AM, I saw a meteor shower. I believe about thirty meteors went by in an hour.”

“Oho. Anything else?”
“It seems that maybe there wasn’t only one meteor shower. As there were two or three radiant points.”

“There’s no maybe about it. It was Aquarius’s Delta and Iota showers and Capricorn’s Alpha shower,” said Endou nonchalantly. “To get more specific, Delta and Iota are split up into north and south showers. So NDA, SDA, NIA, SIA. Their radiant points are close together, so it’s hard to distinguish, but they’re separate alright. The majority’s SDA, though,” he rattled off like it was nothing. “If you like stars, you oughta learn this stuff.”

I unconsciously looked at the two’s faces. Neither had any expression, but I felt the hostility between them had settled.

“Guess it’s not likely you’re lying about going to see the stars.”

With that, he turned back to his desk as if losing interest in us and waved to shoo us away. It looked like he wasn’t going to chastise us for being out late, either. I left the faculty room with Hajikano in bewilderment. From behind, we heard Endou say “Perseid is coming soon, so don’t miss it!”

Meteor showers. So that’s the reason Hajikano had been lying face-up last night.

But I didn’t notice a single shooting star. Since there was something more worth looking at than the night sky.

Once we left the room, before anything else, I thanked Hajikano.

“You saved me.”

Without looking at me, Hajikano began to walk. Normally, I would have gotten nervous at this point, but her having just saved me from a predicament gave me a push.

“So you noticed I was tailing you. Why didn’t you say anything?”

Hajikano stopped and opened her mouth to say something, but ultimately thought better of it and resumed walking.

“I feel bad about following you in secret. It’s not unreasonable that you’d be upset. But I’ve been worried since the incident in the park. Wondering if you’ll try anything funny again.”

If I was giving her such blatant excuses, it probably would’ve been better to be honest and say something like “I like your singing, so I kept following you wanting to hear it again.” But I was focused only on clearing up misunderstandings and showing my good intentions, postponing the things I really wanted to say.

If it were possible, I wanted to explain to her the reason my birthmark had disappeared. Since fourth grade, I was strongly drawn to you. I always thought that if I just didn’t have this birthmark, you would turn to face me. And one day, a mysterious woman called me and proposed as The Little Mermaid-style bet. I could have my birthmark removed, but if I couldn’t form a mutual relationship with you, I would turn to foam…

Sigh. Is there anyone who would believe such a preposterous story? Even if she did believe it, depending on how she interpreted it, she might get the impression I made myself a hostage to force her to like me. From her point of view, it was “You have to love me or I’ll die.” I didn’t want to do something that equated to pointing a knife at my throat and demanding her love. So I said nothing more, and just kept walking alongside Hajikano.

Hajikano looked toward me and let out a deep sigh. And as if running out of patience, she finally opened her mouth.

“…I know you’re thinking of my sake deep down, Yosuke.”

She went quiet after that, and took time choosing her next words. I kept my mouth shut, patiently waiting for them.

“So I want to tell you my feelings as honestly as I can.”

She looked at me head-on and spoke.

“Don’t care about me anymore. It’s an annoyance.”

Hajikano turned her back to me and ran. I quickly grabbed her hand and asked the last question I had in store.

“I heard from a graduate of Mitsuba Middle School about your middle school days.”

Our faces were so close, I saw Hajikano’s pupils dilate.

“What happened to you in those blank four days last summer?”

It was a risky gamble. Generally, I would have wanted to ask this question carefully, after slowly easing up her heart and removing all the obstacles I could. Getting right to the heart of the matter at this point might not only not get me an answer, but make her even more wary. But it seemed I was running out of options. In any event, the question seemed to shake her. There was probably no other time I could talk about it.

Ultimately, that question resulted in her showing me her first emotion-like emotion.

In the worst way, however.

“…Why won’t you just leave me alone?”

After two or three blinks trying to keep it in, a spilling teardrop fell down her cheek. Right afterward, the dam burst and tear after tear fell. She turned away to hide her face from me, wiping her cheeks with her palm repeatedly. She herself seemed bewildered by the tears.

I was filled with guilt at the sight of it. I felt like I’d become an unbelievable villain.

As much as I struggled, maybe all I could do was hurt her. So I thought.

Hajikano left like she was escaping, and I didn’t go after her. Hajikano realized that I was thinking of her deep down. She lied to keep me from being falsely accused. I’d clearly determined that the Yui Hajikano I’d loved still lived on in her now. She looked me head-on and did her best to be honest. *And then she rejected me.*

What more could I do?

Had I been a little more calm, maybe I wouldn't have missed the sight of Hajikano's crying mole blurring from her tears. Maybe I would have noticed that the mole drawn in erasable marker had vanished after she wiped her face.

But it wasn't to be. I couldn't look directly at her as she cried. If I looked at her face for more than five seconds, I feel like I would've gone crazy. I was so thrown off, the mole was pushed completely out of mind.

Kasai called to me as I stood there in the hallway. He came out of the faculty room, saw me, and beckoned back inside with a quiet "Fukamachi."

As I stood in front of his desk with a hollow expression, Kasai spoke.

"First, I need to apologize for something. I checked up on you and Hajikano's relationship in grade school."

He bowed his head to me. "Seems you were good friends after all, just like you said. Sorry for doubting you."

I shook my head apathetically. "In your shoes, I think I would've been just as suspicious of me."

He took a handkerchief out of his pocket to wipe the sweat on his brow, then put it back. He pursed his lips, took a breath, crossed his arms, and leaned back in his chair.

"I've been cautiously watching you these past three weeks. Without any real basis, I was waiting for you to slip up and show your true colors sometime. And I came to this conclusion - at least these days, you're not the kind of guy people would have a strong grudge against. … So then, now I'm getting less and less sure. Why did Hajikano say she didn't want to be in the same school as you? Plus, say she did hate you more than she could bear. Then why did she step in with Endou and send you a lifeboat? Why did Hajikano come from Mitsuba to this school in the first place? There's too much that doesn't add up."

He didn't seem to be seeking the answers to these questions from me. I could only nod back.

"Of course, even if we solve those mysteries, it's too late. Fukamachi, I don't think for a second you're accountable, not anymore. In any event, this is a decided fact. I'll be telling everyone after summer break, but I'll tell you in advance."

"What are you talking about?"

“Hajikano’s withdrawing from Minagisa First High,” Kasai sighed.

According to Kasai, Hajikano had been in the faculty room today to fill out the forms so she could withdraw. Her mother had been there too until just before I arrived. After the last discussion and as they were about to say goodbye is when I arrived. Kasai left his seat to take me to Endou, and Hajikano sat there waiting for him to return. After he did and they had their talk, she was about to leave when she noticed me being questioned by Endou, and after some hesitation, came to my aid.

I thanked Kasai and left, then spent a long time wandering the school without an aim, then left. Under the deep blue post-sunset sky, everything looked pale. In my mind, Hajikano’s crying face surfaced and vanished. Each time, I felt my spirit slowly but surely being grinded down.

The more I tried to go after her, the further away she seemed to get. And as a matter of fact, she had chosen to go far away. Though her destination wasn’t clear, it was somewhere out of my reach.

How does it feel to vanish into foam? I pictured it. It probably doesn’t hurt. Your existence just becomes something thin and uncertain, gradually dissolving in the waves. I felt like there could be no more suitable way to die for a person in the depths of despair over lost love.

At this point, of course, it wasn’t as if I could realistically visualize my death. That wouldn’t be until half a month later, when I personally witnessed a person vanishing into foam.

*

I didn’t feel like going straight home, so I passed by my house. My feet naturally brought me someplace lively. Past the shuttered street, on a long quiet hill lined with bars and snacks, my aimless wandering brought me to a most unexpected reunion.

While gazing at paper lanterns illuminating the stores red and gaudy signs, I thought I heard someone call my name. But I looked all around and saw no one, much less the source of the voice. Just as I determined it to be a misheard remark from inside one of the stores, I heard my name shouted more clearly.

I looked up and met eyes with someone looking down from the second-floor veranda of a bar. Hinohara said “Wait there” and went back inside. A few seconds later, the upstairs light went out. I sat on the curb and waited for him to come down.

Yuuya Hinohara was a friend of mine in middle school. On the night of our graduation, when the job-getters and high-school-goers had a four-on-three fight, he was one of them. Like me,

he was proceeding to high school.

Hinohara went to Minagisa South High School, a somewhat less reputable school than Minagisa First High, but he seemingly applied there simply because he had no real preference for where he went. Though far too intelligent to even begin comparing him to me, he didn't aim for Minagisa First High because he only cared to attend a high school that was within walking distance.

Maybe I'm not really one to talk, but Hinohara was a strange guy. Though his test scores were generally below average, he shocked everyone around him by ending up with around 90% in all his classes. It goes without saying that he was suspected of foul play, but by the latter half of his second year, the teachers had recognized the sheer strength of his dormant abilities. Such a waste, they said in unison. If he took his studies seriously, he could be at the top of the class.

Hinohara, a man with no interest in improving his grades and showing his academic prowess, told me only once about his reason for only rarely taking things seriously.

"I want everyone to get a taste of the irrational," he said in a low, echoing voice. "I want them to know full well that there's someone who can learn in three days what they spent a month on."
"Is that meant to be an enlightenment of sorts?", I asked.

"You could say that. Basically… Once upon a time, there was a woman who thought herself to be beautiful, with average intelligence. One day, she met a woman so perfectly beautiful she couldn't even compare herself to her, and was so shocked she wanted to go around smashing all the world's mirrors. What do you think the woman did then?"

"Had the beauty eat a poison apple."

"Dumbass," he snorted. "Obviously she'd start to work on more than just looks, right? Because she'd been shown there was a competitor she could never beat fair and square. So that's the kind of enlightenment I try to give to students."

He was a man who could say that with a straight face.

By process of elimination, Hinohara would probably be the person I was closest to in middle school. Both he and I had no interest in hanging out with healthy sorts, but that certainly didn't mean we felt at home with delinquents either. Wherever we were, we felt the discomfort of being in the wrong place. Just naturally, it made us get together often.

The tacit agreement between us was "I won't seek anything from you, so you don't seek anything from me." We formed a bond to make it through middle school days full of tedium

and irrationality, and were in fact glad that we could think of each other as merely "convenient friends."

"Sorry to keep you." I heard Hinohara, then saw him descend down old steel steps along the wall of the building. He was dressed light - faded T-shirt, cut-off jeans, black beach sandals. He came up to me and playfully tapped my chest with his fist. "Been a long time. You been doing well?"

"Averagely." I grabbed his fist and pushed it back.

"What's with your face? Where'd the birthmark go? Got surgery or what?"
"It went away naturally. Seems like Mongolian spots go away as you grow."

He folded his arms and twisted his neck. "What a shame. I think I liked it better before. There was something amazing about that birthmark, let's say."

"Thanks. But I'm living a normal high school life now, so I don't need "amazingness.""
"A normal life? You?", Hinohara asked with suspecting eyes.

"Yeah, normal. Since April, I haven't punched a single person, and nobody's punched me. Haven't even been drinking in the gym storeroom or smoking on the emergency stairs. It's a peaceful high school life, nothing awry."

Of course, it was only "normal" if you omitted the many circumstances surrounding the bet. But there was no point giving a thorough explanation of all that to Hinohara. All it'd come to is him thinking it was an intricate joke.

"Our Yosuke Fukamachi, enjoying high school like a normal person…" Hinohara seemed deeply impressed.

"What about you, Hinohara? Same as ever?"
"How should I explain it?", he said, scrunching up his face. "Well, I'd like you to know the significance of me explaining it, too. Seeing as you're wandering around here at this hour, I assume you've got the time?"

Hinohara started walking without waiting for a reply. Without thinking much about it, I followed.

Hinohara led me to a parking lot for a public housing district surrounded by a tall fence. He didn't say this was our destination and seemed to be using it as a shortcut, so I had my guard down. I heard low voices from the corner of the lot, but students being out here at night wasn't uncommon at all in this town, so I paid it no mind.

By the time I realized who they were, it was too late.

Hinohara pushed me from behind in front of them. The four squatting and talking all looked at me at once, and smiled maliciously.

“These guys were pretty insistent about bringing you here,” Hinohara laughed dryly. “Didn’t think you’d show up for me. Saved me the effort.”

I scratched the back of my neck, and tried to remember the names of those faces I hadn’t seen in some time… From left to to right, it was Inui, Nogiyama, Mitake, and Harue. They were the four getting jobs in the big fight on graduation day.

I was aware they had a grudge because of that day. In spring, it seemed they would occasionally call me or lie in wait outside my house, but I was hospitalized the whole time, so I ended up not seeing them. Four months had passed by now, so I figured their anger had settled. But I guess I’d underestimated their deep-seated grudge.

It would’ve made sense if Hinohara was also their target, but this time he seemed to be on their side. I wondered if he was told that he’d be spared if he turned me in. Hinohara was the kind of person to readily sell a friend to save his own hide. He was selfish - or just that cold, maybe.

“Haven’t seen you since graduation, huh?”, spoke the tallest man, Nogiyama. “Sounds like you were in the hospital ‘til recently.”
“Yep, I had an accident the night of graduation, after I left. So I had a pretty long spring break.”

Nogiyama laughed, and the other three followed. Seems like the power dynamic between these four hasn’t changed, I thought. Just like in middle school, Nogiyama assumed clear superiority over the other three.

“You know what’s gonna happen next?”, Nogiyama asked.
“Couldn’t say. Maybe the six of us can go drinking to let bygones be bygones?”

Again, Nogiyama laughed, and the three imitated. Hinohara looked on emotionlessly, but I doubted he had even the slightest intention of coming to my aid. He was that kind of guy. I was on my own to handle this problem.

Nogiyama took a metal bat from one of his henchmen, and after a few test swings, he drew near me and pushed it to my jaw.

“Must’ve been glad to have that long break, huh? I was glad to hear you were in the hospital

myself. 'Cause if my friends are happy, I'm happy. …So here's what I'm thinking. How 'bout we extend your summer break, too?"

Nogiyama gave a self-satisfied grin, and the three cackled.

I re-evaluated the situation. One against four. Depending on Hinohara's mood, one against five. One of them has a metal bat. I couldn't imagine any chance of victory. It was probably best to swallow my pride and run, but they were already closing the distance, driving me into the corner of the parking lot.

I'd just have to prepare for the worst, I thought. Resist as much as I could manage, and leave it up to luck -

Just then, it happened.

"Fukamachi?"

I couldn't see her because of the men standing in my way, but I didn't need any further confirmation of who had spoken.

Nogiyama slowly turned around. I felt a chill run down my spine.

Chigusa, dressed in uniform, was looking at me anxiously.

Why was Chigusa out at this hour? I ran through my thoughts. And I remembered Chigusa saying we had an appointment today for the Minagisa summer festival.

Talk about poor timing.

"I see," Nogiyama said as if having a realization. He was sharp enough to immediately tell the relationship between us.

Nogiyama turned back to me and smiled, a completely face-contorting smile. Like he was just so pleased about what was going to happen.

The situation had changed. There was no time to hesitate. Any action would have to be as quick as possible. While Chigusa's appearance has them distracted and unprepared - this was the only chance I had.

Just as Nogiyama instructed to the other three "Hey, get her over here," I went on the attack. Aiming for the moment he turned back to me, I landed a blow square on his nose. Stepping on his wrist after he fell backward, I pried away the bat, flipped it around, and thrust it right into his solar plexus. Already holding his nose with both hands and writhing, this kept him from

moving any further.

Hearing Nogiyama wail, the three headed for Chigusa finally noticed the commotion behind them. They rushed over and tried to jump me, but I kept them at bay with the bat, then making another forceful blow with it on Nogiyama's shin. He let out a yell of anguish. I felt bad for him, but the theory for a one-against-many fight like this called for an overwhelming beatdown of the group's leader. By creating a situational difference between the head and the followers, you could set them up as onlookers. So I could show no discretion.

Suddenly looking up, I saw Chigusa standing there expressionless. "What are you doing? Get away from there!", I told her, and she nodded, but didn't move from that spot. Maybe she wanted to move, but couldn't.

As a last performance, I kicked Nogiyama in the side, then threw the bat down in front of the three rendered immobile from panic. It made a loud sound as it hit the asphalt. After seeing no one go to pick it up, I squatted down, took a deep breath, and looked up.

"Would you let me call it here for today?"

I put on a smile that looked flattering, but had a hint of cockiness. Of course, it was just a bluff. If the three attacked me all at once, there was nothing I could do.

"If you're just not satisfied, beat me with that bat until you feel better. Then we can call it a draw."

The three looked at each other. Then they looked at curled-up Nogiyama writhing in pain. Two of them picked him up, and with a glare at me, they left in silence.

In the end, only Hinohara remained.

"So, what about you?", I asked him, scratching the back of my neck.

"Nothing, really," he shrugged. "I was just told to bring you here. Man, though, that was quite a show. Always liked that resoluteness of yours."

Then Hinohara glanced at Chigusa. She was still frozen in the same stance as when I called to her. He walked up to her, said "Sorry you got involved in something weird," and walked off in a different direction from Nogiyama's crew. Maybe the reason those three backed off so easily could be owed to the lingering chance of Hinohara coming to my aid, I realized.

Once he was out of sight, I sat down on the spot with relief and closed my eyes. Such luck. That everything went as so smoothly could be nothing but a miracle. If there were a next time, it certainly wouldn't play out this way again.

When I opened my eyes, Chigusa was looking down at me.

Her eyes didn't have any emotion in them. Like she wasn't looking at me, but through me, at the design of the fence behind me

"Who were those people?", she asked.
"Friends from middle school," I replied, not untruthfully.

"Middle school, you say. …Come to think of it, I never did ask what school you came from, Fukamachi."
"You can probably guess now."

Strangely, I laughed. It was a dry laugh.

The sensation of hitting Nogiyama still lingered in my fingers. I closed and opened my hand to get it away, but the impure exhilaration in my hands wouldn't fade easily.

"Minagisa South Middle School. Just like the rumors say, it was a place full of good-for-nothings. Like me, and like those guys."

Chigusa thought for a moment. "Occasionally, I heard of students from there assembling in ruins on the outskirts of town. Were those acquaintances of yours?"
"Not just acquaintances. I was one of them."

"Is that a fact," Chigusa said with no real surprise. "So you were a bad person, Fukamachi."

"Yeah, that's it." I lifted the corners of my mouth. "No more questions?"
"Correct," she nodded.

Now Chigusa hates me too, I thought. I can't get my way out of this. Even if I did it to protect her, there was no mistaking it was a brazen act of violence.

But in a sense, this was an outcome I wanted. I had a natural liking toward Chigusa Ogiue. It seemed to me that Chigusa had a similar kind of appreciation for me. Thus, I thought there was a need for her to start hating me.

August 31st - which, come to think of it, was the last day of summer vacation. If I couldn't move Hajikano's heart by then, I would vanish into foam. If I, as a friend, were to suddenly be lost, Chigusa at least would be made sad. The deeper our relationship got, the more severe the pain promised to her would be.

So before the time came to part, it was good to make myself hated. If by August 31st I could

essentially exhaust Chigusa's good graces for me, then even when I turned to foam, she wouldn't be too torn up about it. Maybe she'd think something like "I should have been a little nicer to him," but it would sidestep any devastating wounds.

I had been wondering how I could go about disappointing her. So depending on how you thought about it, you could say Nogiyama and his lackeys saved me effort. There was no clearer way to show my disgraces to Chigusa. I proved Yosuke Fukamachi to be a person who was involved with dubious sorts, who wouldn't be above violence if it came to it. Chigusa would no doubt scorn me for it. Thank goodness.

I took a cigarette out of my pocket and lit it. I kept a puff in my lungs for a long time, then slowly exhaled.

Chigusa watched the whole thing without moving an eyebrow.

Once about two centimeters of the cigarette had been turned to ash, she broke the silence.

"Come to think of it, I've yet to decide my "request."“
I blinked. "Oh yeah, I did promise that."

I misjudged you. Please, never talk to me again.

Surely that was what she'd say, I thought.

"Fukamachi."

Chigusa suddenly smiled.

"Please, make me a bad person."

It was the night of July 31st.

The cigarette fell out of my mouth to the asphalt, launching miniature fireworks.

Chapter 6: The Place I Called From

August 1st was a designated all-school attendance day at Minagisa First High. Arrive by 9 AM, get a long list of tasks from your teacher, then take a thirty-minute break. Then starting at 10, a talk from the principal in the gym. Once that was over and you got back to the classroom, then began the students' favorite: discussions for the culture festival. The class attractions, the assignment of duties, the time of your next meeting (if necessary) - it all had to be decided within the day. Depending on the class, talks could go right up to 7 PM, the school's ultimate closing time.

Surprisingly enough, the principal's talk wrapped up in less than ten minutes. Retreating from the sweltering gym stuffy with every single student's warmth back to the classroom, as the room was filling with excitement to let the festival prep begin, I leaned over and talked to Chigusa in the seat beside me.

"This could get long, so let's sneak away."

Chigusa blinked a few times, then grinned.

"Ten minutes, next to the gate," I whispered.

Chigusa quickly prepared to leave, and altogether casually slipped out of the classroom. A few eyes gathered on her bold escape, but since she was so natural about it, the witnesses all seemed to rationalize it with various interpretations.

One person harbored doubts: Nagahora in the seat in front. "Is she feeling sick? Ogiue never leaves early."

"Maybe," I said ignorantly. "Or maybe it's simple sabotage."

"No way." Nagahora laughed with a raised eyebrow. "That word couldn't fit anyone in this class less than Ogiue."

"I guess that's true," I agreed, then grabbed my bag and stood up.

"Whoa, don't tell me you're leaving early too?"
"I'm feeling sick."

Evading Nagahora's pursuit, I escaped the classroom. To avoid running into any staff, I went

down the stairs to the hallway leading to the gym, put my indoor shoes in my shoebox, held my outdoor shoes in one hand, and took a detour to leave the school without passing in front of the faculty room.

Though Chigusa left the classroom first, she arrived at the school gate after I did. The sight of her spotting me and jogging over gave me a feeling of wrongness I have no good way of describing. I couldn't tell what exactly it was.

"I'm sorry I'm late," Chigusa said short of breath.

We walked along together. We heard faint chatter and laughter from the open windows of the buildings.

"This is the first time in my life I've left school in the middle of the day."
"You come to class too many days to count anyway. Those who skip win."

"You truly are bad, Fukamachi," Chigusa remarked, finding it too funny to bear. "So, where might we be headed to now?"
"Who knows. I'm still thinking about it."
"Then let us sit down somewhere and think it over together."

We went into a nearby bus stop. It had a roof, so it was the perfect place to do some thinking while protected from the sunlight. A bus only came once every hour or two, so we wouldn't even be mistaken for passengers and cause drivers any trouble. The sheet iron walls had holes in places, and posters and tin signs for used car places and consumer loans were plastered all over them like a mosaic.

Seeing Chigusa sit and stretch her legs, I finally realized what was amiss earlier. Her skirt was shorter than usual. That said, it was at most 15 centimeters above the knee, and plenty of girls at Minagisa First High wore skirts that length. But for Chigusa who essentially never deviated from the uniform, it was something unheard of.

Until then, I had never thought deeply about the beauty of knees, and only classified them as thick or skinny. But when I saw Chigusa's knees, I had to recollect my thoughts. Knees, just like the eyes, the nose, and the mouth, could be a strongly defining body part. Just a few millimeters difference had such a massive change in impression, a delicate yet eloquent feature. And Chigusa's knees were more ideal than any I'd ever seen. Painting an elegant curve with no wrinkles, her knees brought to mind a carefully-cooked white porcelain vase.

"Is that another way of "letting your parents down"?", I asked, looking at her knees.

"Ah, so you noticed." Chigusa lifted her bag onto her lap to block my gaze. "That's right. I made it shorter. I feel somewhat restless."

“It feels really fresh to see you dressed like that.”
“My apologies, they’re so unsightly…” Still holding her bag, she bowed repeatedly like a pecking bird.

“Have some confidence. You have such pretty legs, after all.”
“Do you think so…? Thank you very much.”

With her head still bowed, she thanked me ticklishly, but didn’t budge the bag on her lap.

“One day in my third year of middle school, I realized something. I was a mediocre person who could easily be replaced, like an extra in a picture.”

The night I was attacked by Nogiyama, after Hinohara left, Chigusa told me: “Please, make me a bad person.” Convinced I would hear a rejection at that moment, it was completely unexpected. Stomping out the cigarette that fell from my gaping mouth, her words echoed in my mind.

Make me a bad person?

“Sorry, perhaps putting it that way is unclear.” Chigusa averted her eyes and scratched her cheek. “I’ll explain in the proper order. Though it may not come across very well…”

Then she began to speak, bit by bit. In her third year of middle school, while taking an course on interviewing, she was astonished to realize she couldn’t think of a single thing to describe herself as a person. She became aware for the first time that she’d just lived as her parents told her to, not making a single decision worth calling a decision.

“In other words, I was an empty person,” Chigusa said as if reading a sentence she’d already read. “I had no failures, but I had no successes either. I could serve in many people’s place, but many people could take my place. I could be liked by anyone, but I could not be anyone’s favorite. That was Chigusa Ogiue.”

She averted her eyes and smiled self-derisively.

“Of course, that could apply to many people on some level. However, my mediocrity stood a head above the rest. When my friends spoke about their past experiences, I always felt uncomfortable, as if someone was sneering at me. On occasion, I even felt like I was being blamed. "You’re lacking in experience in every sense, you don’t have any way to describe yourself - such an empty person.”“

Perhaps remembering her pain, her words were slightly hoarse.

"There were many people with nothing inside them all around me. Mitsuba Middle School, where I once attended, felt like a collection of samples of girls living tedious lives. People traveling down pre-laid rails without a single doubt, only deciding which car and which seat to sit in, convinced they were making crucial life decisions. That said, somehow they seemed to think of themselves as fairly individualistic people. To my eyes, it seemed as if they had made an agreement to forcibly characterize each other and put on an act of being rich with personality."

Worried I would be bored by her long story, Chigusa kept glancing at my expression. I kept nodding to show interest and encourage her to continue.

"I felt a faint coldness from such a relationship, and quickly changed my choice of high school. Perhaps something would change if I went there, I thought. Of course, my parents resisted, but I managed to coax them with assorted logic. That was my first time clearly defying my parents' will. My heart danced to have finally been able to take the first step in my own life. …Yet, ultimately, even at Minagisa First High, the fundamental parts of me did not change. A commonplace cheery girl had simply changed into a commonplace mature girl."

At this point, Chigusa looked up into my eyes.

"So, Fukamachi. I want to stick outside the box. I don't believe there's any aspect in which I excel over others. So I at least want to do things to make people furrow their brows, to have teachers scold me, to disappoint my parents - to escape a pre-established harmony. Whatever filthy color it may be, I want to be a more genuine me. Will you assist me with that?"

There was plenty of room for a rebuttal. For one, I'd never thought of Chigusa as a mediocre, commonplace person, and could offer up several ways she excelled over others. Most importantly, only a handful of truly unique individuals existed in the world, and she was making a mistake asking the far-more-mediocre me for assistance.

But I gulped down the words as they came up my throat. This was the conclusion Chigusa herself had come to after plenty of thought. It wasn't an issue for me to speak on, having known her for less than a month. If Chigusa wanted to stick outside the box, then that was the right thing to do. Even if it was a mistake, a mistake done after careful consideration is worth about as much as the right thing.

"Got it. I'll help," I agreed. "But what exactly should I do to make you a bad person?"

Chigusa spoke after a decent pause.

"I don't mind if it's only for the day. Tomorrow, could you treat me as if I were one of your middle school friends? I'd like to experience the unhealthy lifestyle you once lived with your

friends.”

That would be fine, I thought. To tell the truth, I didn’t want Chigusa to be a delinquent, and spending more time together would make it harder to part. But if it was just a day, that was nothing. I had plenty of time to make a recovery afterward. If that made her feel better, then why not?

Just maybe, when we first met and she said “Wish for my freedom,” this was what she meant.

“Have you thought of something?”, Chigusa asked, moving the bag on her lap to the side.
I shook my head. “Delinquent things are hard to think up on the spot.”

“Then let’s enforce some limits,” she said, sticking up her index finger. “Did you ever slip away without permission with your friends in middle school?”
“Countless times.”
“Do any such days stick out in your memory?”

I searched my thoughts. “Come to think of it… Second year, in summer, I faked sick in fifth period to get out early. We got out at different times, and met up outside of school like today.”
Chigusa jumped on it. “Tell me more about that day, please.”

“We sneakily bought cigarettes from a vending machine, then had a party in Hinohara’s room. Oh, Hinohara’s the one guy who apologized to you last night, Ogiue. His house was a bar, so he had plenty of alcohol. We didn’t really know how to drink at the time, so we just kept drinking without stopping. I remember both of us getting drunk in no time, and throwing up in the toilet together.”

“Wonderful. That sounds fun,” she said with a smile, then seeming to have an idea.

“Let us do that.”
“What do you mean?”
“I mean, we should party at my house.”

“Are you being serious?”
“Yes. It’s all right. There should be alcohol at my house.”

Chigusa got up and leapt into the sun outside the bus stop. Then she turned and beckoned to me.

“Let’s go, Fukamachi.”

After going down a long, winding hill, the lake smell grew stronger. Chigusa's house was in an intricate residential district.

I'd already had the thought when escorting her home yesterday, but it was a model semi-rich family's house. Made of brick, with a mowed lawn, a shined-up expensive car, a garage full of tools, and a porch lined with decorations in good taste. It was all above average, yet you could clearly see where the family was making compromises. That kind of house. Of course, there was no doubt it looked pretty wealthy compared to my place.

Chigusa led me into the house through the back door. Built on an incline, the house had entrances on both the first and second floor. The second-floor entrance, facing a wide path, seemed to be used as the front door, whereas the first-floor, facing a thin path, was the uncommonly-used back door. It was the ideal design for Chigusa to sneak in without her family noticing.

Not turning on the hallway lights, we proceeded down the hall with extreme care not to make any noise, my eyes on Chigusa's back. The reversed roles of first and second floors wasn't limited to the entrances; the living room and kitchen were on the second floor, with the bedrooms and nursery on the first. Though a relatively minor difference, I felt extremely restless, like I was driving backwards down a one-way road.

After we entered Chigusa's room and she locked the door, I let out a deep sigh. The room was air-conditioned and comfortable. "Take a seat," she told me, so I sat in a chair in front of a coffee table. Starting with the chair and table, I noticed the room furniture had a matching dark brown color scheme. Maybe it was a little too calming for a sixteen-year-old girl's living space. Or maybe girls' rooms were just like this nowadays?

"I've secretly brought a boy into the house," Chigusa said. "It would be dreadful if my parents found out."
"I'll pray that won't happen."
"Since what's more, it's former bad boy Fukamachi."

"Just so I know, what *would* happen if we were found?"
"Nothing, really. It would just be terribly awkward. Surely my father and mother would be unsure how to treat me, I suppose. Such a development wouldn't be so bad."

"Well, maybe an excessively orderly family needs a little chaos."
"Indeed. So you need not worry, Fukamachi."

Chigusa opened a cabinet and took out two white cups, then three marine blue bottles from a lower drawer. The labels had a mermaid drawn on them, and "Mermaid Tears" written in pale white letters. A local drink that any citizen of Minagisa would know.

“For some reason, my family frequently receives alcohol. But since no one drinks it, it only piles up. There are six more of the same in the kitchen. If you want them, go ahead.”
“Thanks, but I’ll pass.”

We filled each other’s cups, sat in front of the coffee table, and quietly gave a toast. After quickly downing her cup in one swig, Chigusa furrowed her brow and said “Strange flavor,” but poured a second cup from the bottle.

“Looking as pretty as it does, I had expected a cleaner flavor.”
“Yeah, it’s surprisingly dry.” I finished my cup too and poured a second. “So, how does it feel indulging in underage drinking?”

The cup headed for Chigusa’s mouth stopped at her chest, and she faintly smiled.

“It’s very thrilling.”
“That’s good.”
“…Ah, yes. Hold on a moment.”

Chigusa then opened the cabinet again and put a small glass bottle on the coffee table.

“Use it as an ashtray. You smoke, do you not?”
“Thanks. But it’s not like I smoke that frequently. And your room would stink if I smoked in here…”
“Please, smoke. I wish to try it, too.”

I took a pack from my bag, pulled out two cigarettes, and handed one to Chigusa.

“Wakaba,” Chigusa read from the packaging.
“It’s third-rate. Gross, but cheap.”

I held my lighter up in front of Chigusa, and she timidly held the filter and held it near the flame. “Suck in,” I instructed, and the paper faintly lit red.

After taking in the smoke, sure enough, Chigusa coughed. After hacking up a storm with tearful eyes, she glared scornfully at the cigarette in her fingers. Then she tried a second time, and this time slowly let out the smoke without coughing. I lit my own and we quietly smoked together.

“I think I finally understand,” said Chigusa as she imitated me in tapping the cigarette on the edge of the bottle to knock off ash.
“What do you understand?”
“This is the smell you sometimes have, Fukamachi.”

“Do I have that much of a nicotine smell?” I sniffed my shirt.
Chigusa snickered. “No, it’s really only a faint smell. Normally, one wouldn’t notice it.”

After finishing our cigarettes, we again filled our cups.

“You don’t have to push yourself to drink a lot, okay?”, I advised after seeing her down a third cup.

“Right. But if I’m drinking, should I not try to get drunk at least once?” Then she poured a fourth cup.

Brown cicadas buzzed outside the screen door. Due to the brightness outside, it felt dark and gloomy in the room. It was an August-esque, languid summer afternoon. Having aimless conversation, we leisurely continued to drink.

Chigusa seemed to be a heavier drinker than appearances might have indicated. I tried to keep up with her pace, and soon felt my senses growing hazy.

“What’s the matter? Fukamachi, are you sleepy?”, Chigusa asked in an oddly good mood, maybe because of the alcohol. Last time I checked, she was in front of me, but now she was beside me. Maybe I was the one who moved? The order of events in my memory was hazy.

“Seems I’m a little drunk,” I replied.

“I may be as well. I’m oddly enjoying myself,” Chigusa remarked without any slurring.
“Fukamachi, Fukamachi. What typically happens when people get drunk?”

“Depends on the person. Some people change completely, and some don’t change at all. Some are merry drinkers, and some are sobbing drinkers. It’s just different habits. Some start suddenly preaching, and some get nice beyond recognition. Some fall asleep comfortably, some get quick to fight, some get all touchy-feely…”

“Well, that’s me.”

Before I could respond, Chigusa collapsed on my shoulder like a puppet with cut strings.

“What’s this?”, I asked, hiding my bewilderment.
“My drinking habit,” she replied, unable to fully conceal her embarrassment. “I’m feeling clingy.”

“Uh, Ogiue. You don’t decide what kind of drunk you are for yourself.”
“It’s all right. I’ll apologize later.”

Being coaxed with incomprehensible logic, I lit up another cigarette to conceal my increasing temperature.

“Fukamachi, are you the type that doesn’t change when drunk?”, she asked.
“I dunno. I’ve drank too much and thrown up, but I’ve never gotten properly drunk before.”

“It’s all right if you cry and shout. And I won’t mind if you’re touchy. …Oh, but I would slightly dislike being preached to.”

“Seems like you’re a talkative drunk, Ogiue,” I joked. She rubbed her face on my shoulder with displeasure.

Soon, my eyelids got heavy. Seems I’m a sleepy drunk, I thought distantly, and was swallowed by afternoon drowsiness.

When I opened my eyes, the sun was going down, and the room had gotten pretty dark. The cups were dried up and let off a sharp smell.

I had a rough feeling on my cheek. That quickly reminded me that I had fallen asleep in Chigusa’s room. I quickly shot up, and heard a yelp at my ear.

“G-Good morning,” Chigusa awkwardly smiled.

After four or five full thoughts, I realized what kind of situation I’d been in.

Apparently, I had been sleeping using Chigusa’s thighs as pillows.

“Was I asleep?”, I said rubbing my eyes, concealing how flustered I was. “You should have woken me up.”

Chigusa coughed quietly. “…I should just mention, you fell over into my lap.”

“I did?” I tried to recall falling asleep, but my memory seemed to cut off somewhere. “Sorry. Are your legs numb?”

“It’s all right. You’re a lightweight, Fukamachi,” Chigusa remarked with faint smile as I fumbled.
“You’re just too heavy a drinker, Ogiue.”

I looked up at the clock. It was 7:30 PM.

Chigusa spoke with her gaze fixed on the glass bottle on the table. “Um, Fukamachi, I’m sorry

about earlier.”
“No, I should be sorry.”

We bowed our heads to each other, then an unspeakable silence persisted. I tried to light a cigarette to fill it, but I reconsidered and put it in my pocket.

“We should get some fresh air.”
“Yes, good. Let’s do that,” Chigusa agreed with a look that said “thank goodness.”

The residential district was brimming with assorted smells at night. Smells of dinner on the wind - fish, miso soup, meat and potato stew - and the smell of soap from a bathroom window stimulated my nose.

Chigusa’s walking beside me seemed unstable. Hardly tottering or anything, but she swung from side to side.

“Were you perhaps drinking while I was asleep?”, I asked.
“I mean, you wouldn’t wake up, Fukamachi.”

“I’m not blaming you. I’m impressed.”
“Is that right? Tell me if you get sleepy, lightweight Fukamachi,” Chigusa said cockily.

“Now, it’s finally night. The ideal time for ne'er-do-wells. What badness do you wish to do?”
“Don’t get your hopes so high. I’m just a hoodlum.”

Walking without thinking about the destination, my legs seemed to carry me where they knew how. Without even realizing, I was headed down the road to the usual shopping district. Somehow, it felt like there were oddly many people headed in the same direction. Every time people passed us by, there were wafting smells of deodorant and bug repellent.

“I wonder if there’s a festival or some such?”, Chigusa pondered.
“Might be one at the shopping district. Yeah, I want to say they do one around this time every year.”

“While we’re near, would you like to go see it?”
“Sure. Can’t think of anything else to do right now.”

We went with the crowds to the festival grounds. Though the shopping district was typically just deserted and vaguely creepy at nighttime, today it was brilliantly colored by tens or hundreds of paper lanterns. Stands lined both sides of the street, and many young people filled the area.

“So there are more summer festivals in Minagisa than just the one,” Chigusa remarked with wonder, gazing at the stands.

“Yeah. Tons of people.” I stood up tall and looked toward the back of the street. “But I’m sure the Minagisa summer festival gets many times more visitors than this.”

Chigusa sighed. “Now I’m getting nervous.”

Forgetting about doing badness for now, we went by all the stands from end to end. Yakisoba, sumiyaki, honeycomb toffee, sculpted candy, cotton candy, shaved ice, a string lottery, yo-yo fishing, a mask shop, superball fishing. Chigusa stopped at a goldfish scooping stand, and her eyes sparkled at the goldfish swimming around the white tank.

A small child was squatting in front of the fish tank, glaring seriously at the goldfish. When he stuck the poi scooper into the tank, it made a ripple that scattered the koaka fish. The sight of the red shapes dispersing reminded me of exploding fireworks.

“Fukamachi, Fukamachi. There’s one strange one.”

I looked into the tank alongside Chigusa, and sure enough, mixed among the koaka was a single fat ryukin goldfish.

“What do you know… How unusual.”

I gave a look at Chigusa, trying to share her surprise. But she was absorbed in the goldfish in the tank and didn’t notice.

I found myself looking at Chigusa in profile. Gazing at her smiling face lit by the soft light of a light bulb, all of a sudden it occurred to me what an incredibly unfitting happiness had been bestowed upon me. And that thought was nothing less than the truth. Instantly, rather late, the core of my body heated up, and I came to see each passing second as precious.

But at the same time, I had to think: If it were Hajikano I was sharing these seconds with, how good would that be? If I just had her smiling beside me, how fulfilled would that make me feel?

I felt guilty for ignoring the girl before me and imagining one who wasn’t here in her place, so I averted my eyes from Chigusa. Instead, I watched the boy scooping goldfish.

He was handling the paper poi skillfully. He prepared to catch one goldfish, then at the last second changed the angle of the poi to aim for another. The goldfish that he avoided had white specks, like it was covered with flour. Maybe it was sick.

I supposed he avoided that specked goldfish not because he reasoned it might die an early death from sickness, but just because it felt somehow creepy. It wasn't like it was something he did out of clear prejudice.

It was the same for those who avoided me when I had my birthmark. I wasn't avoided because people thought I had genetic issues, or because I had some malignant disease, but because people felt somehow too creeped out to want to approach.

Why can people know logically that it's not that significant, but be led astray by such slight differences in appearance? When really, everyone's not so different if you just look more than skin-deep.

Yet the day when people's foolishness to judge solely by appearance is bettered, the beauty of these hundreds of goldfish swimming around a white tank, the vivacious feeling welling up in me from seeing Chigusa's face - all of that I was feeling now would be lost. So I couldn't speak out against that hasty judgement. If people's true natures became the basis of judgement, the world would surely become a terrifyingly insipid place.

Chigusa stood up. "Sorry, I became rather entranced. Let's move on."
"Won't you try the goldfish scooping?"
"No, I'm not one for keeping living creatures."

After going through all the stands, we bought two piles of shaved ice and looked for a place we could sit down and eat it. Just then, something briefly crossed my vision and alerted my subconscious.

I had a bad omen. I quickly grabbed Chigusa's hand to stop her, and my gaze darted around. My prediction was correct, and a few meters away, I saw several familiar faces.

Inui, Mitake, Harue. The three who had tried to attack me with Nogiyama last night. They sat in a row on the curb, their backs turned to us, talking about something. Nogiyama probably wasn't there because of the damage I'd inflicted.

As far as I could tell from their conversation, they weren't looking for me for payback, but were simply here to enjoy the festival. I breathed a sigh of relief. That said, if they saw me, it could probably be trouble.

"Er, what is the matter?" Chigusa asked with some nervousness, looking between her hand and her face.

"It's the guys from last night," I said quietly, letting go of her hand. "I don't think they're looking for me, but it'd be bad if they saw us. Let's retreat while we can."

Chigusa stood tall and followed my gaze. “I see. The three sitting there?”
“Right. They haven’t noticed us yet.”

“Fukamachi.” She looked toward my hand. “Do you mind if I take that shaved ice?”
“Shaved ice? That’s not really the…”

Before I could finish, Chigusa took the cups of shaved ice and quickly walked over to the three. I had no time to stop her, and the next moment, Chigusa was dumping the shaved ice on their backs. An emerald green mix of solid and liquid drew a parabola as it fell upon them. Making voices which were either screams or shouts, the three turned around, but Chigusa didn’t falter, and poured the shaved ice with lemon drops in her other hand on their front sides. Then she turned on her heel, ran back, and took my hand as I stared in shock.

“Now, let us run.”

It sure seemed like that was the only thing to do.

*

I think we ran around for about twenty minutes. Eventually, we ended up back at the shopping street where we started. The festival had long since ended, the lanterns were gone without a trace, and most of the stands were cleaning up, so people were sparse.

Looking back one last time to check for them chasing us, we sat down on a low wall and caught our breath. My heart flailed like a fish just reeled in, and sweat poured out my body. My stiff, sweat-soaked uniform felt unpleasant.

I didn’t feel like condemning Chigusa for doing something so rash. In fact, I had respect for her actions. Seeing them flustered after having shaved ice poured on them was thrilling, and I hadn’t felt the excitement of running away from something chasing me in a long while.

“Next time you do something crazy, tell me first.”
“Sorry,” Chigusa said out of breath.

“But that was good. Very relieving. Very delinquent.”
“Was it? That’s good.” Chigusa smiled with her eyes, her head still lowered.

I was really parched. I put my hands on my knees and stood up.

“I’ll go buy something to drink. You rest there.”

Chigusa looked up and nodded silently. I ran over to a brightly-shining vending machine a few dozen meters away, and came back with two sports drinks with blue labels. Chigusa tried

to offer her wallet. I refused, but she insisted. “Since I did ruin the shaved ice.”

I took the 500-yen coin she offered me. “Okay, let’s use this money to buy something for delinquency.”
“Agreed.”

After downing the sports drinks and throwing away the empty bottles, we entered a supermarket just before closing time and bought fireworks. And we spent a while walking around in search of the least appropriate place to use them.

“Perhaps we might as well sneak back into the school we deserted at noon, and launch them on the field somewhere?”, Chigusa suggested. “Don’t you think that’s sufficiently mischevious?”
“Not bad,” I agreed.

Breaking into Minagisa First High was easy. We waltzed right in after climbing over the gate, and there wasn’t any real security system. Surely the buildings were probably locked, but it didn’t seem anyone would find fault with us wandering around campus.

Maybe I was just accustomed to the school being full of staff and teachers, but at night, Minagisa First High was wrapped up in an extreme silence, like any peep was sucked up into the walls. The green lamp of the emergency exit cast an eerie light from the other side of the window.

While walking on the gravel behind the gym, I suddenly recalled a conversation with Nagahora on the day of the closing ceremony.

“The guys from the swim club sometimes practice at night without permission,” Nagahora said. “Since the fence is so short, it’s not hard to break in. There’s no patrols at all, so if you’re not unlucky, you won’t get caught. Hey, Fukamachi, want to sneak in with me once on summer break? Swimming as much as you like in a pool at night isn’t a chance you’ll get anywhere else.”

“That does sound fun,” I nodded. “But you should be careful, pools are horribly cold at night. If you jump in without a care, it might be pretty miserable.”

Nagahora thought for a second. “You sound like you’ve got experience.”
“I just happen to know. I had a friend who did the same thing in middle school.”

That was a lie, of course. Once, I was invited by some friends to sneak into the pool at night. There were clouds covering the sky all day, and the pool that night was colder than anything. It helped a little that we jumped in with our clothes on, but ten minutes later, our lips were purple and we were running home dripping wet.

“I didn’t think about the temperature,” Nagahora said with admiration. “Bet you’d want to pick a day that’s especially hot. Around the start of August would be perfect…”

Then Kasai opened the door into the classroom, so the conversation was cut short. That was ultimately the only time we discussed sneaking into the pool. Since then, I’d completely forgotten Nagahora ever mentioned it.

I didn’t really feel the urge to swim. Sure, this was miraculously the hottest day of the year, and thus the perfect day for night swimming. The water should have been clean for the swim club’s practice. However, it wasn’t Nagahora with me, but Chigusa. I couldn’t make her join me in something so ridiculous as this.

Still, I figured just walking around the poolside would be fun., so I told Chigusa what I’d heard from Nagahora. And she showed incomparable interest in this stupid idea. “We simply must to do that, let’s do that right now,” she urged.

Climbing over the fence less than two meters tall, we touched down by the pool. Obviously, it was pitch black, and the pool was a deep blue, the bottom not visible. The wind made small waves on the surface, breaking against the edge and making quiet splashes. Occasionally, the smell of chalk unique to school pools struck my nose.

I took off my shoes and felt the rough poolside, neither warm nor cold. I rolled up my pants and put my toes in the water glittering in the moonlight. It was just the right coldness to feel good. “That’s good,” said Chigusa, who took off her loafers and socks and drew an ellipse in the water with her right toe.

I resolutely sat on the pool edge and soaked my legs below the knees in the water. My legs hot from running around were thoroughly cooled, and felt revived. The energy left my body, and I fell back onto the poolside like a deflating life preserver.

Listening to the sound of the water, I looked up at the night sky. The sole light sources from the parking lot didn’t reach the distant pool, so while not a match for the roof of the hotel, it wasn’t a bad place to view the stars.

Once I thought about stars, my chest clouded as I was unable to avoid remembering a certain person, but I forcibly put her out of mind. I couldn’t worry over what had already come and gone.

I heard a sound from the end of the pool. Before I could process that it was Chigusa taking off her uniform, I heard a loud splash. Drips of water hit my cheek, and I sat up in a hurry.

At first, I thought Chigusa had fallen into the pool by mistake. But seeing her discarded blouse

and skirt, I realized she jumped in intentionally. And if her clothes were there, that meant Chigusa, sticking her head out of the water, was wearing nothing but underwear - if that.

I was so surprised, I had no words. What in the world was she thinking?

“Don’t scare me,” I finally uttered. “I thought you slipped and fell.”

“Apologies. But it’s nice and cool,” Chigusa said, wiping her forelocks. Her white shoulders poked out of the water, and I worried for where to look.

Not brave enough to swim with her, I stayed sitting at the rim of the pool. Then Chigusa walked up to the water’s edge and held out her hands to me.

“Lift me up, please.”

I gulped, and grabbed her hands while trying not to make eye contact. But the moment I was about to pull, she forcefully pulled me. I tried to stand my ground, but my feet didn’t make it, so I lost balance and fell into the pool.

It was pitch dark in the water, so I had no idea where anything was. After struggling a while, my feet found the bottom. I stuck my head out of the water and wiped my face, then looked around for Chigusa. I heard laughter behind me. “Hey, remember what I said about telling me…”, I said as I turned, and found Chigusa’s face right in front of my nose.

We met eyes at a close distance.

The expression she had was a kind I hadn’t seen before, neither happy nor joking. If I had to find the closest description, it was a look of surprise. Like the kind when you’re cleaning a room and find a precious childhood photo you thought you lost.

There was a long short silence. Or maybe a short long silence.

I slowly averted my gaze and put my hands on the edge of the pool.

“Let’s look in the storage room. Might find something interesting.”
“Indeed. A beach ball would be nice, for instance.”

Even Chigusa’s reply was extremely natural.

I’d discovered during class in July that the storage room’s lock was broken. Mixed in among items like kickboards, flotation devices, lane markers, and scrubbing brushes, there was a single blue beach ball. I took it to the sink, washed it with water, and blew it full of air. After filling and capping it, I took a few deep breaths to calm myself, then left the storage room.

I hesitated greatly, but Chigusa being in underwear and me being fully clothed felt somehow unfair, so I also stripped down and jumped in the pool. A splash went up and fell onto the sides. I hit the beach ball up high, and Chigusa happily went after it.

My head spun again seeing her white back, but as we hit the ball back and forth and swam around, I gradually stopped worrying about it. Chigusa swimming nude in a pool at night was just too beautiful to be an object of my desire. When beauty crosses a certain line, it somehow detaches itself from impure feelings.

While playing in the pool, Chigusa called out “Yosuke” numerous times. Oddly, it didn’t feel strange being called that. Judging from how I felt when she first said it, maybe it was calling me by my surname that felt more unnatural.

Similarly, I tried calling her Chigusa in return. My voice found it familiar, like I’d already spoken it many times.

“Once more,” Chigusa said. “Call me again.”

So I did as she said.

Lastly, we played with toy fireworks in the corner of the parking lot. Water still dripped from our clothes and hair, making dark stains on the dry asphalt. My wet shirt and underwear took my body heat, making me a little chilly. We had no candle to light the firework, so I used my lighter to scorch the ends of two Long Peonies. Once both were lit, I handed one to Chigusa.

The flame transferred to the main part of the firework, and one after another, shots fired off like plant roots into the darkness. After proceeding through the stages of peony, pine needle, willow, and chrysanthemum, the ball’s purpose was complete and it dropped off, making a low splash in the water that dripped from our bodies.

We silently went on lighting fireworks. We were exhausted after leaving the pool and didn’t say much to each other, but it wasn’t the awkward kind of silence.

As the last two fireworks began firing off, Chigusa spoke. “Fukamachi.” She’d gone back to using my last name.

“You were thinking about Hajikano just now, weren’t you?”

I didn’t deny it, but asked her back. “Why do you think so?”

Chigusa giggled. “Why, indeed? Well, my bad premonitions are often correct.”

I dutifully answered honestly. “Your hunch is right, Ogiue.”

“See, what did I tell you?”, she said jokingly. “Furthermore, I suppose not only now, but several times while we’ve been together, Hajikano has come to mind.”

“Yeah, you’re not wrong there.”

“Were you thinking, "What if it wasn’t Chigusa Ogiue in front of me, but Yui Hajikano”?“

The ball on Chigusa’s firework dropped before it fully burned, meeting a sudden end.

"Thank you for joining in my selfish whims today,” she said without waiting for a reply. “I had a great deal of fun spending the day with you.”

My firework still went on burning.

“But, Fukamachi. If there’s really something that strikes your interest, if there’s really a person that you’re wondering about, please don’t concern yourself with me, and settle that issue first. You still have a lingering affection for Hajikano, don’t you? Isn’t that why you occasionally forgot about the girl standing in front of you to think about her?”

She picked up the used-up fireworks and put them in a bag, tied a knot, and gradually stood up.

We walked to the school gate in silence. I couldn’t find any words to say. Everything Chigusa said was an accurate truth, and anything I said would just sound like an excuse.

“…You haven’t yet exhausted everything you can do for her, have you?”, Chigusa suddenly spoke. “Then you should see that through to the end.”

After passing the gate, she came to a stop. She bowed her head to me to say “this is far enough.”

“Today really was a pleasure. Thank you for the wonderful day.”
“I enjoyed it, too. It was a good day.” It took me ages just to say that. “Thanks.”

Chigusa smiled with deep joy to hear it. “Say, Fukamachi. You made me promise to tell you in advance before doing anything crazy, did you not?”
“Yeah,” I nodded, though not getting why she was asking.
“I’m about to do something rather strange.”

Before I could reply, Chigusa shortened the distance between us looking as if she was going

to fall, stood up a little taller, and softly put her lips on my neck.

Even I could feel the blood rushing to my head and turning me red.

“If there’s anything I can assist with, let me know,” she whispered in my ear. “Even if entails showing kindness to an enemy, I’ll do it if it’s of use to you. And after you’ve done everything to completion, if you still have a slight bit of interest in me… then feel free to call for me anytime. I’ll wait patiently.”

With that, Chigusa fled the scene. I watched her go while standing like a scarecrow, and even after she was out of sight, I couldn’t move a muscle.

At this point, I finally understood the meaning of that “cruel thing” Chigusa had mentioned one day. It wasn’t a joke at all. I was unconsciously doing something terrible to her.

I was bewildered by this new truth coming from an unexpected angle. I could intuit she at least had good will toward me, but I didn’t imagine it was such a distinct and romantic attraction.

Chigusa’s words played on repeat in my head for the duration of about five cigarettes. But at least at present, I couldn’t easily answer to her feelings.

Still, there was one thing she said that was definitely on-point. I still hadn’t exhausted everything I could do. A small possibility remained somewhere in my heart.

Subconsciously, I had kept thinking about it. But I hesitated to let it surface. Fearing the risk of being hurt in going through with it, I intentionally removed it from my options.

Now, at least once, I had to face that possibility. To dig up that thing hidden in my consciousness, shine light on it, and face it head-on.

That’s what Chigusa was telling me.

That night, I headed for the shrine park near Minagisa High. I went up the long steps one by one, and sat on the swing Hajikano was once on. The rusted chain made a screeching noise. Someone had removed the rope Hajikano tied on the bar. Maybe she retrieved it herself.

I thought there all night.

What could I do?

What was Hajikano seeking?

By the time the sky turned a faint violet, I came to a conclusion.

*

The buzzing of cicadas even reached into the closed-off room. Mixed in with familiar sounds was the sound of tsukutsuku-boushi cicadas, which I hadn't heard until yesterday.

I sat cross-legged on the floor of my room and gazed at jet streams outside the window. The two straight white lines in the sky perfectly divided the view of the sky through the window frame into two halves.

As the noon cicadas' voices died out and the chorus of higurashi began, I finally lifted my heavy body. There was a heavy old-style steam iron on the desk. I connected the plug coming out of the charging stand to the outlet, gave the dial a full turn, and waited for the iron to heat up.

After about ten minutes, I grabbed the iron handle and held it with the flat side facing me. The openings to let out the steam reminded me of seeds in a fruit. Come to think of it, I'd never had the chance to look at the bottom of an iron in such detail. Staring at the strange shape like a cut-open watermelon, sweat from my forehead dropped off my hair, and evaporated into a little puff of smoke with a satisfying sound.

The room was illuminated with the light of the western sun.

Once, because of the inferiority that came from the birthmark covering half my face, I thought I had no right to love Hajikano. And if you inverted that, it meant that if only I didn't have my birthmark, I would have the qualifications for her to love me.

But maybe that was just a one-sided impression of mine. While it could have possibly been accurate four years ago, at least in the present, the disappearance of my birthmark had never once aided in coming closer to Hajikano. In fact, more than that. It was preventing any progress.

The day I visited Hajikano's house to determine the truth of what Kasai told me, in a dark room with curtains closed, she touched my cheek and rubbed it again and again. As if in search of the birthmark that should have been there. Maybe what Hajikano really needed now wasn't a person to kindly console her, but a companion with the same injury - that suddenly occurred to me, looking back on that day.

And once I came to have that mindset, this scenario the woman on the phone had put together started to seem coherent. She claimed to have made this bet as fair as she could. I thought my odds of success were far too low for that to be true. But maybe she was telling the truth, and

the bet was being carried out fairly. In other words, she had prepared a path for toward victory for me, too.

Removing my birthmark took away an obstacle between me and Hajikano. That was my thought at first. But was the truth the exact opposite? Had removing my birthmark taken away a red thread of destiny connecting us? Maybe the true nature of this bet wasn't asking, "Can a normally-impossible love happen with the removal of an obstacle?", but that woman saying, "Can I add an obstacle to set back a love that normally wouldn't be held back?"

By personally renouncing the birthmark-less face I was temporarily given for the bet, I could advance my relationship with Hajikano. That was a situation the woman on the phone intentionally created. I was being tested to see if I would give up the ideal body I was granted for the girl I loved. Looking at it that way, would I?

If I was right about this, I needed to regain my lost ugliness. I had to prove to that woman there was nothing higher-priority to me than Hajikano.

But while I had to "get my birthmark back," a simple bruise would heal in no time. I wanted a semi-permanent mark of ugliness. So I thought to use the iron.

Where my birthmark had once been, this time, I would give myself a large burn.

If I'd had a little more good judgement left in me at the time, I could probably see how foolish it was from an objective standpoint to burn my face with an iron to get Hajikano's attention. Yet with the combination of the short remaining time on the bet and the confusion Chigusa caused me last night, I had a narrow perspective. You could say I was deranged. I was possessed by the naive thought that strong pain had to have a high return.

The hand I held the iron with was damp with sweat and trembled. The peak of the pain would probably be in the first instant. But the problem came after that. If I cooled it off too quickly and adequately treated it, the burn would just fully heal. If I wanted to make it "part of me" like my former birthmark, then after firmly burning my face at max temperature, I would probably have to not cool or treat the burn for an hour at least. Imagining that hour made my legs buckle.

Still, I had already made my decision. Slowly but surely, I got accustomed to the image of me burning my face. Once it reached a certain point, I was suddenly able to accept it all naturally. Or maybe logically, you could say I went fully mad. I closed my right eye, and pushed the iron plate heated to the necessary temperature toward my face,

when the phone rang.

If that noise had come a tenth of a second later, I'm sure the iron would have had no problem

burning my face. At a distance close enough to scorch my eyelashes, my hand stopped.

The ringing came from the phone in the first floor hallway. I couldn't be sure, but from the timing and the way it echoed, I felt sure it was the woman who orchestrated this bet.

I put the iron back in the stand, ran down the stairs, and took the receiver.

"Hello?"

There was no reply.

Usually, there would be a one-sided dialogue of telling me some business, but this one time, I heard nothing. But just because I couldn't hear anyone didn't mean there was no one there, and I sensed there was a living person's breathing on the other end. The person seemed to be quietly listening to my breathing.

The silence went on. Just as I opened my mouth with impatience, with the suddenness of a hidden track on a CD after leaving it alone on the last track for over ten minutes, the person on the other end spoke.

"Who are you?"

It wasn't the usual woman's voice, but it was one I'd heard before.

A moment later, my head was filled with questions.

"Hajikano?", I asked. "No way, is that you, Hajikano?"

I heard her swallow. From that reaction, I was convinced the caller was Hajikano.

"How?", the person I thought to be Hajikano said. "How did you call here?"

That sentence repeated in my head. How did I call here? It was a strange way to put it. She made it sound like I had called *her*.

"Answer," Hajikano said. "How did you know I was here? Are you nearby?"

There seemed to be a discrepancy here. I got my head in order and decided on what the most important matters to have clarified were.

"Listen, Hajikano, stay calm and listen," I said soothingly. "You just asked me "How did you call here?", right? Are you telling me you didn't call me, but you *just answered the phone?*"

There was a silence as if for thought. I assumed that to be proof and continued.

"Well, same here. I was at home, and I heard the phone ringing, so I answered. And then I heard your voice. Where are you? Not at home?"

"…Chakagawa Station."
"Chakagawa Station?"

"One of the unmanned stations along a route that was shut down a few years ago. In other words, Yosuke, a place you wouldn't know," Hajikano explained plainly. "I was wandering around there when a public phone rang. When I took the receiver, I heard you. …Just what is going on?"

Of course, I knew the cause. It was the doing of that woman who proposed a bet to me. While her methods and objectives were unclear, I could only imagine she had some involvement in such an irrational occurrence.

I didn't know why she had made such an arrangement at the exact time she did. Maybe the woman on the phone was pleased that I was about to take back my own ugliness for Hajikano's sake. So she decided to give me a little chance.

But explaining all those subtleties would surely only further confuse Hajikano. While thinking up ways to dispel her wariness, she said "So you don't know either," seeming ready to hang up.

"Wait. I'm begging you, don't hang up," I pleaded. "I want you to listen to me, just for a little bit. You're changing schools soon, aren't you? Before you leave, there's something I want to tell you. It'll take two minutes. You don't even have to reply. Just listen, that's all I ask."

There was no response. But also, no sign of hanging up. Relieved, I sat down on the floor and leaned against the wall. The sunlight coming through the window at the end of the hall cast a shadow of me on the opposite wall.

"As you know," I began, "the birthmark on my face vanished without a trace. It was something that normally would never go away. Countless doctors tried to cure it, and threw in the towel. They all more or less said "You'll just have to compromise." That's the kind of birthmark it was. …But just a month ago, there came a sudden turning point."

I stopped there and listened closely. There were still faint noises, so the call hadn't been terminated.

"Explaining it in detail would take a whole lot of effort. And maybe no matter how I go about explaining it, it'll be impossible to accurately convey what I've experienced without

misunderstandings. In any event, I met someone, and had my incurable birthmark cured - but it was a hefty trade. Before too long, I'll have to give up something more important than anything to that person. But of course, I did it all of my own volition, so the responsibility's all on me."

Unconsciously, I stroked the area where my birthmark had been.

"But… It sounds strange, but truthfully, lately I've stopped thinking so badly of my birthmark. I'd had it on my face for sixteen years, came to accept its existence, and even picked up some attachment. And yet, why did I pay such a massive price to have it removed?"

After a deep breath, I gave the answer.

"Because I wanted you to like me, Hajikano."

The moment I spoke, the air around me felt more damp, and I sensed a smell like split-open berries spreading. I felt something hot behind my ears, and my heart beat faster. Though Hajikano wasn't there in front of me, I covered my mouth with my open hand to hide my red face.

"Anyway, that's all I wanted to tell you," I appended. "Though from your reaction, it seems like the idea you'd like me just because my birthmark was gone was a one-sided misconception."

Once I'd finished with what I wanted to say, I closed my eyes and listened for her response. The call was still going, but I hadn't heard a sound. Maybe Hajikano wasn't actually listening to me in silence, but had left the receiver hanging and left… Just as I began to have such fears, I heard a sudden cough.

"Can you hear me?", she asked. "Are you still there?"

I replied immediately. "I plan to be here until you hang up. However long it takes."
"I see."

There was a thoughtful silence.

"I don't know," Hajikano said with concern. "I was sure you felt pity for me now, and that's why you were so overly concerned. I thought you just sympathized seeing me with the same problem you once had."

"Well, I'm not that mature of a person."
"Yes, so it seems."

There was no change in her tone. Even so, the image of Hajikano smiling on the other side surfaced in my mind.

“…To tell the truth, I do like that about you even now,” Hajikano admitted. “I’ve hardly come to hate you, Yosuke. So then, the reason I dislike being with you… is purely a personal problem.”
“A personal problem?”

“When I see you, I go mad with jealousy,” she said with a light sigh, as if embarrassed with herself. “That said, it’s not your birthmark being gone that I’m terribly jealous of. It’s because you’re a strong person who was able to accept his birthmark and live a decent life, and I’m a weak one who’s been unable to do that, and fallen to such lows in less than half a year. That fact hurts me more than anything. When you’re in front of me, I have to constantly acknowledge it. That’s the hate that’s led me to put distance between us.”

Hajikano was silent for a few seconds. Somehow, I felt I could see her purse her lips and rub her birthmark.

“At this point, this birthmark isn’t such an issue. The issue is my weakness that will let one blemish ruin me. When I see you now, Yosuke, my chest could burst from sheer misery.”

“I think you’re still misunderstanding me,” I interjected. “If you saw me as accepting my birthmark and living a decent life, you’re mistaken. The truth is, I was saddled with a feeling of inferiority. Every time I looked in the mirror, I thought how nice it would be to just be reborn.”

I switched the phone to my right hand and toyed with the cord with my left.

“I didn’t get through it all by myself. You were a big support to me back then. Because you accepted me, Hajikano, I could feel like accepting my birthmark. The birthmark I’d come to think of as such an ugly, dirty thing, I could think of as a mere piece of discolored skin once you touched it. That’s how significant Yui Hajikano was to me.”

“…It really never seemed that way,” Hajikano said doubtfully.
“That’s not unreasonable. Since I’ve been trying to keep it as cool as I could in front of you.”
“Why?”

“I didn’t want to accept that deep down, I strongly desired contact with someone else. And more than that, I was scared of you and those around me realizing the feelings I had for you. I felt like they’d scorn me. "You think a guy like you has the right to love Yui Hajikano?” So when I was with you, I tried to keep a cool face.“

Yes, in my eyes, Yosuke Fukamachi wasn’t a person who could love a specific girl. He

would be someone who never loved anyone and was never loved, only living at a solitary pace.

"But each time I parted from you and went home, the conversations we had that day repeated in my head, burned into my memory. On days when especially happy things happened, I wrote them in my journal to re-read later. It might sound stupid, but at the time, I did that kind of thing to make it through the days of crushing inferiority. Even after going our separate ways for middle school, my memories of the days spent with you propped me up when I was hurting. If I hadn't met you, Hajikano, my weak endurance would someday crumble for sure."

After a while, Hajikano whispered something.

"…So you were thinking things like that."

Just then, I heard a quiet sound like a buzzer on the other end.

"What's that sound?", I asked.
"The telephone. I think it's the sound it makes when the time is expiring," she answered.
"This call might end soon."
"Oh, I see…"

I was regretful about it, but I had told her everything I wanted to.

"Thanks for not hanging up on me. I was glad to talk to you."

Just afterward, the call cut out.

Even after the call ended, I stood for a long time in front of the telephone.

Just like back then, I was soaking indefinitely in my conversation with Hajikano.